



Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken

General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan

Date June 2024

Publication details

Version number 1.0
Town/city The Hague
Drawn up by the Country of Origin Information Unit

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This translation has been co-funded by the European Union.



Contents

	Publication details.....	3
	Introduction.....	6
1	Political and security situation	7
1.1	Political situation	7
1.1.1	National Assembly	7
1.1.2	Presidential elections.....	8
1.2	Security situation.....	9
1.2.1	Domestic security situation	9
1.2.2	Military confrontations	9
1.2.3	Blockade of the Laçın corridor.....	10
1.2.4	Military escalation from September 2023.....	12
1.2.5	Demonstrations.....	13
1.2.6	Freedom of movement	15
2	Identity and documents	18
2.1	Compulsory identification, ID and travel documents.....	18
2.1.1	Identification requirement.....	18
2.1.2	Identity documents.....	18
2.1.3	Travel documents	18
2.2	Document fraud	19
2.2.1	Visa-related fraud	19
2.2.2	Asylum-related fraud.....	19
3	Human rights	21
3.1	Position of specific groups	21
3.1.1	Ethnic groups.....	21
3.1.2	Compulsory military service	24
3.1.3	Members of opposition parties and political activists.....	32
3.1.4	LGBTIQ+	37
3.1.5	Women	41
3.1.6	Minors and unaccompanied minors	44
3.2	Compliance and violations.....	50
3.2.1	Freedom of expression	50
3.2.2	Freedom of religion and belief.....	61
3.3	Supervision and legal protection	65
3.3.1	Legal protection.....	65
3.3.2	Judicial process	66
3.3.3	Arrests, custody and detention	67
3.3.4	Maltreatment and torture.....	68
4	Refugees and displaced persons.....	72
4.1	Internally displaced persons	72
4.1.1	Position of internally displaced persons	72
4.1.2	Return to the original areas of residence	72
4.2	Refugees and asylum seekers.....	73
4.2.1	Human rights conventions.....	73
4.2.2	Asylum seekers	74
4.2.3	Refugees	74

5	Return	76
5.1	Voluntary return	76
5.2	Forced return from the European Union	76
5.3	Problems after return	77
5.4	Return of unaccompanied minors	79
6	Appendices	80
6.1	List of abbreviations used	80
6.2	Reports and publications	81
6.3	Websites	86
6.4	News sources	88
6.5	Legislation and regulations	88

Introduction

This Country of Origin Information Report was drawn up on the basis of the questions asked and points for consideration mentioned in the Terms of Reference (ToR) compiled by the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security. The ToR for this Country of Origin Information Report were adopted on 17 November 2023. These ToR, together with the Country of Origin Information Report, are available on the website of the Dutch Government.

This General Country of Origin Information Report describes the situation in Azerbaijan insofar as this affects the assessment of asylum applications from individuals originating from this country, and for decision-making regarding the return of rejected Azerbaijani asylum seekers. This Country of Origin Information Report is an update of the General Country of Origin Information Report from September 2021. The reporting period covers the period from September 2021 up to and including April 2024. This report is a factual, neutral and objective representation of the findings that were made during the period under consideration. It is not a policy document, nor does it reflect the Dutch government's vision or policy in relation to any given country or region. The report does not contain any conclusions concerning immigration policy.

This Country of Origin Information Report has been compiled on the basis of public and confidential sources, using carefully selected, analysed and verified information. In the compilation of this report, use was made of information from various sources, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), specialist literature, media reporting and information from relevant government agencies. Except where the facts are generally undisputed or unless stated otherwise, the content in this report is based on multiple sources. The public sources that were consulted are listed in Chapter 6 of this Country of Origin Information Report.

This Country of Origin Information Report also draws on information obtained in part through the diplomatic representation of the Netherlands in Azerbaijan, in addition to confidential conversations and correspondence. A visit to Azerbaijan was also made. The information gleaned in this way was used primarily to support and augment passages founded on publicly available information. Each of these sources is marked as a 'confidential source' in the footnotes and accompanied by a date.

Chapter 1 addresses the political and security situation. Chapter 2 explores documentation. Chapter 3 addresses the human rights situation. Chapter 4 discusses the situation of refugees and internally displaced persons. The Country of Origin Information Report concludes with a chapter on return.

1 Political and security situation

1.1 Political situation

In the Republic of Azerbaijan, the centre of power lies with the presidential apparatus.¹ President Ilham Aliyev (İlham Əliyev) has ruled the country since October 2003.² In 2017, he appointed his wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, as first vice-president.³ On 14 February 2024, he began his fifth term in office.⁴ After taking office, he reappointed Ali Asadov (Əli Əsədov) as prime minister. Asadov has held this position since October 2019. All but two cabinet members returned to their former posts in February 2024.⁵

Azerbaijan was ranked 130 out of 167 in the Democracy Index 2023 of the UK weekly *The Economist*. This placed it within the category of countries with authoritarian rule.⁶ According to the US NGO Freedom House, there was consolidated authoritarian rule, and the country was considered unfree.⁷

1.1.1 National Assembly

The National Assembly (*Milli Məclis*) consists of a single chamber of 125 seats. During the reporting period, this body was dominated by the New Azerbaijan Party (*Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası*, YAP).⁸ The YAP was by far the largest political party. According to the party's website, it had more than 730,000 members in May 2024.⁹ This ruling party was entirely at the service of its chair, President Aliyev.¹⁰ In the National Assembly, the YAP had the absolute majority, with 69 seats.¹¹ In addition to the YAP, there were nine other parliamentary parties. The Civic Solidarity Party (*Vətəndaş Həmrəyliyi Partiyası*, VHP) of Sabir Rüstəmhanlı (Sabir Rüstəmhanlı) had three seats. The remaining eight parties had one seat each. Some experts referred to them as constructive opposition parties, as they generally supported government policies.¹² Following the February 2020 general election, 41 non-party MPs also entered the National Assembly. In general, they also supported the government.¹³

¹ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 1; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 country report Azerbaijan*, 19 March 2024, p. 11.

² RFE/RL, *Azerbaijan: Ilham Aliyev sworn in as new president*, 31 October 2003.

³ Meydan TV, *First lady of Azerbaijan instated as first vice-president*, 29 October 2021.

⁴ BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan's Aliyev sworn in for fifth presidential term*, 14 February 2024.

⁵ Trend, *New cabinet of ministers excludes two ministers from previous setup*, 16 February 2024; Turan, *Ali Asadov reappointed as prime minister*, 16 February 2024; Turan, *The 'new era' with the old government*, 16 February 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan president reappoints cabinet members*, 16 February 2024; JAMnews, *Ilham Aliyev has approved a new composition for Azerbaijan's cabinet of ministers*, 16 February 2024.

⁶ EIU, *Democracy Index 2023. Age of conflict*, 15 February 2024, pp. 12 and 50.

⁷ Freedom House, *Nations in transit 2023, Azerbaijan*, 24 May 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024.

⁸ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 33; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 country report Azerbaijan*, 19 March 2024, p. 14.

⁹ YAP, www.yap.org.az/az/, consulted on 15 May 2024.

¹⁰ AzerNews, *Turkiye president congratulates Azerbaijani ruling party's on its 30th anniversary*, 23 November 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan's top opposition parties allowed to continue operating*, 15 September 2023; AzerNews, *New Azerbaijan Party launches Ilham Aliyev's campaign*, 15 January 2024.

¹¹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2022 country report Azerbaijan*, 23 February 2022, p. 14; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani political parties struggle amid new restrictive law*, 27 January 2023; ODIHR, *Azerbaijan, early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 3.

¹² Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan cultivates one-way political 'dialogue'*, 12 November 2021; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2022 country report Azerbaijan*, 23 February 2022, p. 13; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani MP survives shooting*, 30 March 2023; Freedom House, *Nations in transit 2023, Azerbaijan*, 24 May 2023.

¹³ Reuters, *Azeri ruling party leads in snap parliamentary vote*, 9 February 2020; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2023, Azerbaijan*, 9 March 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: The veneer of democracy is peeling off Baku's authoritarian political structure*, 11 May 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

After the February 2020 elections, the results had been declared invalid in 4 of the 125 constituencies.¹⁴ Furthermore, a non-party MP died on 4 August 2020.¹⁵ On 27 December 2021, a YAP MP lost his seat because of a criminal conviction.¹⁶ On 17 March 2022, a non-party MP gave up his seat due to a new job.¹⁷ Furthermore, two non-party delegates died in 2023.¹⁸ In addition, on 8 April 2024, the president appointed a YAP MP to head the State Committee on Religious Associations (*Dini Qurumlarla İş üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi*, DQİDK).¹⁹ Afterwards, no new elections were organised for the vacant seats, leaving them empty.²⁰

1.1.2 Presidential elections

On 7 December 2023, President Aliyev decided to advance the presidential election by fourteen months to 7 February 2024.²¹ On 15 December 2023, the Müsavat Party (*Müsavat Partiyası*, see 3.1.3.3), which was not represented in the parliament, announced that it would not participate in these elections.²² The next day, the party congress of the Popular Front Party (*Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyası*, AXCP, see 3.1.3.2), which was also not represented in the parliament, decided to boycott the elections.²³ Thereafter, seventeen candidates sought nominations from the Central Election Commission. In early January 2024, this committee registered six opposing candidates alongside the incumbent President Aliyev. All seven candidates were men.²⁴ The elections proceeded smoothly. International observers were present that day.²⁵ The Electoral Commission announced the final results on 11 February 2024. According to this commission, President Aliyev obtained 92.12% of the vote. The turnout was 76.43%.²⁶

¹⁴ Turan, *Shahin Seyidzade terminates parliamentary powers*, 16 March 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: The veneer of democracy is peeling off Baku's authoritarian political structure*, 11 May 2023.

¹⁵ Turan, *Father of emergencies minister, MP Heydarov dies*, 4 August 2020; Azərbaycan 24, *President Ilham Aliyev signs obituary on Fəttah Heydarov's death*, 4 August 2020; Turan, *Shahin Seyidzade terminates parliamentary powers*, 16 March 2022.

¹⁶ JAMnews, *Azerbaijani strips MP of immunity for attacking police officer*, 2 August 2021; Turan, *Salimov expelled from the ranks of the ruling party*, 2 August 2021; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani MP under arrest for beating police officer*, 5 August 2021; Report, *Eldaniz Salimov loses parliamentary mandate*, 27 December 2021; Turan, *Shahin Seyidzade terminates parliamentary powers*, 16 March 2022.

¹⁷ Turan, *Shahin Seyidzade terminates parliamentary powers*, 16 March 2022; Trend, *Deputy powers of Azerbaijani MP terminated*, 17 March 2022.

¹⁸ Turan, *Deputy of the milli majlis Məhər Musayev has died*, 14 July 2023; APA, *Azerbaijani MP died*, 14 July 2023; APA, *Azerbaijani MP Ganira Pashayeva fell into a coma*, 24 September 2023; Trend, *Azerbaijani MP Ganira Pashayeva passed away*, 28 September 2023; Turan, *Milli majlis deputy Ganira Pashayeva dies*, 28 September 2023.

¹⁹ APA, *Azerbaijani president appoints Ramin Mammadov as chairman of State Committee on Work with Religious Institutions*, 8 April 2024; Turan, *MP Ramin Mammadov appointed head of State Committee for Work with Religious Structures*, 8 April 2024; ABC.az, *Mandate of this MP to be annulled*, 1 May 2024.

²⁰ ODIHR, *Azerbaijan, early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 3; confidential source, February 2024.

²¹ BBC Monitoring, *Azeri leader calls snap presidential election for February*, 7 December 2023; OC Media, *Aliyev announces snap presidential elections for February*, 7 December 2023; ODIHR, *Early presidential election, 7 February 2024 interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 2.

²² Turan, *'Musavat' refused to participate in the presidential elections*, 15 December 2023; Reuters, *Opposition parties reject Azerbaijan's snap election call as undemocratic*, 18 December 2023.

²³ Turan, *PPFA decided to boycott early presidential elections*, 16 December 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Main Azeri opposition parties to boycott presidential election*, 16 December 2023; JAMnews, *Who will take part in the extraordinary presidential election in Azerbaijan?*, 20 December 2023.

²⁴ Turan, *The CEC has registered the candidacies of four more people in the early presidential elections*, 9 January 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Seven men to stand in Azerbaijan's snap presidential election*, 10 January 2024; ODIHR, *Early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 1; BBC Monitoring, *Explainer: Azerbaijan media's constrained presidential poll coverage*, 31 January 2024; Turan, *The presidential elections are held without genuine political rivalry*, 2 February 2024.

²⁵ OSCE, *Lack of genuine political alternatives in a restricted environment characterized Azerbaijan's presidential election, international observers say*, 8 February 2024; OBCT, *Snap elections and 'snapping' victory – Azerbaijan's most embarrassing election to date*, 9 February 2024.

²⁶ JAMnews, *Ilham Aliyev won with 92.12 percent of the votes according to the final results*, 9 February 2024; APA, *Azerbaijan's CEC announces results of snap presidential election, Ilham Aliyev wins with 92.12 percent of votes*, 11 February 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Azeri constitutional court endorses presidential election results*, 13 February 2024.

1.2 Security situation

1.2.1 Domestic security situation

The domestic security situation was largely dependent on the interstate conflict with Armenia. The Karabakh (Qarabağ) region and nearby districts had long been at the centre of this conflict. The region had been internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan since 1991.²⁷ After the First Karabakh War (1991-1994), the armed forces of the Republic of Armenia exercised control over the region. Armenians in the region sought affiliation with the Republic of Armenia and declared independence. Although it was not recognised by the international community, this self-proclaimed republic behaved *de facto* as an independent republic with its own legislative, executive and judiciary. This involved Armenia's influence on governance and protection by the Armenian army. There was considerable cooperation between the self-defence army of the unrecognised republic and the Armenian armed forces.²⁸ During the 2020 Second Karabakh War, the Azerbaijani army captured nearby districts and part of the Karabakh region.²⁹ In Autumn 2023, the rest of the Karabakh region came entirely under the effective control of Azerbaijan. After the military escalation of 19 and 20 September 2023, the Armenian population fled this region (see 1.2.4).

Elsewhere in Azerbaijan, no large-scale security incidents occurred during the reporting period. The authorities had a large police force at their disposal. There was a high level of monitoring through camera surveillance, including the use of facial recognition technology.³⁰ The number of peaceful demonstrations remained limited (see 1.2.5). Almost all land borders remained closed to passenger traffic. With permission, a visit to the Karabakh region and nearby districts was possible (see 1.2.6).

1.2.2 Military confrontations

After the 2020 Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan and Armenia continuously accused each other of violating the 9 November 2020 ceasefire agreement.³¹ Several security incidents occurred along the borders, which were not always well-defined. These incidents included shelling by snipers, skirmishes and military operations.³² Multiple military escalations took place, including in November 2021, in March 2022

²⁷ These districts are Kalbajar (Kəlbəcər), Laçın, Qubadlı, Zangilan (Zəngilan), Jabrayıl (Cəbrayıl), Füzuli and Ağdam; Eurasianet, *Down with Nagorno-Karabakh – long live Karabakh*, 2 April 2021; JAMnews, *Karabakh and East Zangezur economic regions are created in Azerbaijan*, 7 July 2021; ICG, *Upholding the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia*, 28 September 2022.

²⁸ Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus. An introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 115; The Guardian, *Why is there dispute over control of Nagorno-Karabakh?*, 19 September 2023; Eurasianet, *The Nagorno-Karabakh Republic: The life and death of an unrecognized state*, 2 January 2024.

²⁹ For additional information on the Second Karabakh War of 2020, see 1.2.2 in the General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan of 14 September 2021.

³⁰ Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2023, Azerbaijan*, 9 March 2023; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, April 2024.

³¹ RFE/RL, *Reports of shelling as tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan appear to boil over*, 9 December 2021; RFE/RL, *Tensions build along Armenia-Azerbaijan border amid renewed deadly clashes*, 10 December 2021; Reuters, *Armenia and Azerbaijan accuse each other of breaking ceasefire pact*, 23 September 2022; Caspian News, *Armenia continues provocations in Azerbaijani territories: Foreign ministry*, 25 November 2022; OC Media, *Week of ceasefire violations in Nagorno-Karabakh as tensions mount*, 17 March 2023; ICG, *The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: A visual explainer*, 16 September 2023.

³² RFE/RL, *Armenian, Azerbaijani foreign ministers agree on structure of border demarcation commission*, 25 April 2022; AzerNews, *Azerbaijani defense ministry publicizes names of servicemen killed in Armenian provocation*, 5 March 2023; JAMnews, *'Baku is trying to change the status quo': opinion from Yerevan*, 6 March 2023; JAMnews, *'Hundreds of bullets fired': details of the death of Armenian policemen in NK*, 10 March 2023; RFE/RL, *Armenia, Azerbaijan report casualties amid 'intense fire' on border*, 1 September 2023.

and in August 2022.³³ One of the strongest upsurges of violence since the Second Karabakh War of 2020 took place in September 2022.³⁴ On the night of 12-13 September 2022, heavy fighting broke out in several places on and around the Azerbaijan-Armenian border.³⁵ The shelling and attacks (including drone attacks) continued the next day. The Azerbaijani army managed to gain some ground during these attacks. On the evening of 14 September 2022, both sides agreed on a ceasefire.³⁶ On 17 September 2022, the Azerbaijani Defence Ministry reported that 282 soldiers and 2 civilians had been wounded.³⁷ The ministry also published a list containing the names of 80 fallen soldiers.³⁸ According to the Armenian Security Council, at least 207 people had been killed or were missing on the Armenian side. In addition, 293 Armenian military personnel and 3 civilians had been wounded, and 20 military personnel were taken as prisoners of war.³⁹

After the September 2023 military escalation (see 1.2.4), security incidents continued to occur along the Azerbaijani-Armenian border.⁴⁰ According to an Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry report of early April 2024, 350 Azerbaijani casualties were caused in the Karabakh region and nearby districts by landmines and other explosive remnants of war left behind since the end of the 2020 Second Karabakh War. Of the 350 victims, 65 lost their lives, including 50 civilians and 15 military personnel.⁴¹

1.2.3

Blockade of the Laçın corridor

The five-kilometre-wide Laçın corridor contained the only connecting road between the Karabakh region and the Republic of Armenia. This main road ran from the city

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- ³³ France 24, *Armenia says troops killed, detained in border clash with Azerbaijan*, 16 November 2021; BBC News, *Armenian troops killed in Azerbaijan border clash*, 16 November 2021; Caucasian Knot, *Seven Azerbaijani militaries perish in border hostilities*, 17 November 2021; Azərbaycan 24, *Body of soldier killed in Armenian provocation handed over to his family*, 18 November 2021; RFE/RL, *Armenia says six of its soldiers killed in latest clashes with Azerbaijan*, 19 November 2021; DW, *Russia: Azeri troops breach peace with Armenia*, 26 March 2022; Eurasianet, *Russia reproaches Azerbaijan as fighting escalates in Karabakh*, 28 March 2022; Chatham House, *With Russia distracted, Azerbaijan escalates in Karabakh*, 30 March 2022; Caspian News, *Azerbaijan conducts operation 'Revenge' in response to Armenian provocation*, 3 August 2022; Eurasianet, *In renewed fighting, Azerbaijan captures additional territory in Karabakh*, 4 August 2022; Caucasian Knot, *Azerbaijan claims capture of strategic height in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 6 August 2022; Turan, *The Azerbaijani army also established control over Buzdukh Mount too*, 6 August 2022; Report, MoD: *Mount Buzdukh and its surrounding heights under control of Azerbaijani army*, 6 August 2022.
- ³⁴ OC Media, *Explainer: What happened in Armenia and Azerbaijan on 13-14 September?*, 15 September 2022; ICG, *Upholding the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia*, 28 September 2022.
- ³⁵ AZERTAC, *Armenian armed forces commit large-scale provocation in directions of Dahskasan, Kalbajar and Lachin*, 13 September 2022; Euractiv, *What Azerbaijan's assault on Armenia says about the new world order*, 20 September 2022.
- ³⁶ Reuters, *United States, U.N. hope Armenia, Azerbaijan truce holds*, 16 September 2022; Reuters, *Armenia and Azerbaijan accuse each other of breaking ceasefire pact*, 23 September 2022; ICG, *Upholding the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia*, 28 September 2022.
- ³⁷ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Information of the ministry of defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 17 September 2022.
- ³⁸ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *2022-ci il sentyabrın 12-dən etibarən Ermənistan silahlı qüvvələrinin törətdiyi genişmiqyaslı təxribatların qarşısının alınması zamanı şəhid olan hərbi qulluqçuların siyahısı* (The list of soldiers killed while preventing large-scale provocations by Armenian forces as of 12 September 2022), <https://mod.gov.az//images/pdf/a1163b6146e1143e29be346c213e4dc6.pdf>, consulted on 15 May 2024.
- ³⁹ CivilNet, *Armenia raises number of dead, missing to 207*, 19 September 2022; ICG, *Upholding the ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia*, 28 September 2022.
- ⁴⁰ AZERTAC, *Azerbaijan army's serviceman became shehid as a result of sniper fire from the territory of Armenia*, 30 September 2023; AZERTAC, *Azerbaijan army positions in Kalbajar subjected to fire, defense ministry*, 5 October 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Baku denies Armenian soldier wounded by Azeri troops*, 18 November 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Baku says Azeri soldier wounded in shooting at Armenian border*, 12 February 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Azeri state border agency reports 'retaliation operation' at Armenian border*, 13 February 2024; The Independent, *Armenia and Azerbaijan trade accusations over border skirmish that leaves 4 soldiers dead*, 13 February 2024; BBC News, *Four Armenian soldiers killed in new Azerbaijan border flare-up*, 13 February 2024; Trend, *Armenian armed forces shell Azerbaijani army positions in Kalbajar district*, 9 April 2024; Turan, *Azerbaijani border guard wounded as a result of a shot from Armenia*, 10 April 2024.
- ⁴¹ APA, *Throughout post-conflict period total of 350 Azerbaijanis became landmine victims – MFA*, 4 April 2024; AzerNews, *In post-conflict period, 350 Azerbaijanis become landmine victims – MFA*, 4 April 2024.

of Khankendi (Xankəndi, known in Armenia as Stepanakert) past the cities of Şuşa and Laçın to the Armenian city of Goris. In the trilateral agreement of 9 November 2020, it was agreed that a Russian peacekeeping contingent would oversee this mountain pass and Azerbaijan would guarantee the safe passage of civilians, vehicles and goods in both directions.⁴² From the morning of 12 December 2022 to 28 April 2023, a group of self-proclaimed Azerbaijani eco-demonstrators blocked this road.⁴³ On 23 April 2023, Azerbaijan set up a checkpoint at the bridge over the Hakari (Həkəri) River. This bridge gave access to the Laçın corridor.⁴⁴ These blockades left the Karabakh region without supplies of essential services and goods (e.g. food, medicine and fuel) for months. In addition, there were electricity outages and gas-supply shutdowns.⁴⁵ The Azerbaijani border forces only allowed vehicles of the Russian peacekeeping contingent and the International Committee of the Red Cross to pass through (ICRC).⁴⁶ On 15 June 2023, they closed the road to all traffic after military personnel were shot at near the bridge.⁴⁷ Nine days later, on 24 June 2023, the ICRC was authorised to carry out medical evacuations to Armenia.⁴⁸ On 11 July 2023, Azerbaijani border guards stopped some ICRC vehicles, as they had allegedly found contraband.⁴⁹ Furthermore, on 28 July 2023, Azerbaijani authorities arrested an Armenian from the Karabakh region who was part of a medical evacuation by the ICRC. On 7 November 2023, a military court in Baku sentenced this Armenian man to fifteen years in prison for committing war crimes during the First Karabakh War (1991-1994).⁵⁰

⁴² UNSC, *Letter dated 10 November 2020 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2020/1104)*, 11 November 2020; UN, *Lachin corridor must be reopened for humanitarian aid, security council hears, as speakers urge Armenia, Azerbaijan to normalize relations*, 16 August 2023.

⁴³ CNN, *'Potatoes are a luxury': Vital supplies dwindle as 'eco-activists' blockade a breakaway region guarded by Russia*, 12 January 2023; Time, *How Azerbaijan weaponized environmentalism to justify ethnic cleansing*, 22 February 2023; AA, *Protests by Azerbaijani environmental activists on Lachin road reach 100 days*, 21 March 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani 'eco-protest' ends after checkpoint installed on Lachin Corridor*, 28 April 2023; Politico, *Azerbaijani activists end Nagorno-Karabakh sit-in as Baku tightens grip on region*, 28 April 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani 'activists' end blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 1 May 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani 'eco-activists' complain over grant cuts*, 31 May 2023; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 country report Azerbaijan*, 19 March 2024, p. 6.

⁴⁴ EIU, *Azerbaijan sets up checkpoints on the Lachin corridor*, 27 April 2023; ICG, *New troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh: Understanding the Lachin Corridor crisis*, 22 May 2023, p. 2; JAMnews, *'11,000 people lost their earnings': the consequences of the 6-month blockade of NK*, 13 June 2023.

⁴⁵ CNN, *'We are starving to death': Residents of Nagorno-Karabakh fear for future under blockade*, 7 September 2023; Council of Europe, *Observations on the human rights situation of people affected by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region*, 12 January 2024, p. 3.

⁴⁶ ICG, *New troubles in Nagorno-Karabakh: Understanding the Lachin Corridor crisis*, 22 May 2023; IWPR, *Azerbaijan's blockade paralyzes Nagorno Karabakh*, 6 June 2023; ICRC, *Operational update on ICRC's work across the Lachin Corridor*, 18 August 2023.

⁴⁷ Reuters, *Armenian, Azerbaijani border guards wounded at entrance to closed Karabakh road*, 15 June 2023; JAMnews, *'Baku's provocations are aimed at the complete isolation of the NK Armenians'. Assessment from Yerevan*, 16 June 2023.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *No:352/23, Press release on the meeting of Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan with the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Delegation in Azerbaijan Dragana Kojic*, 24 June 2023.

⁴⁹ OC Media, *Azerbaijan blocks Red Cross access to Nagorno-Karabakh*, 11 July 2023; Meydan TV, *International Committee of the Red Cross vehicles have been prevented from crossing through Lachin*, 11 July 2023; ICRC, *ICRC statement on transport of unauthorised goods across the Lachin corridor*, 11 July 2023.

⁵⁰ RFE/RL, *Baku court holds preliminary hearing into case against Karabakh Armenian*, 13 October 2023; AzerNews, *Vagif Khachatryan's trial begins today*, 13 October 2023; RFE/RL, *Karabakh Armenian charged with taking part in 1991 massacre pleads not guilty*, 17 October 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani court sentences Armenian man to 15 years for war crimes*, 7 November 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Baku jails Armenian man on genocide charges*, 7 November 2023; RFE/RL, *Karabakh Armenian accused of genocide, jailed 15 years in Azerbaijan*, 7 November 2023; Eurasianet, *First Karabakh Armenian convicted in Azerbaijan*, 9 November 2023; Azatutyun, *Azeri court upholds jail term for Karabakh Armenian*, 15 January 2024.

In mid-July 2023, Azerbaijan offered to send relief supplies by road from the city of Ağdam, but the Karabakh-Armenian administration of the unrecognised republic did not allow them through.⁵¹ On 25 July 2023, the ICRC sounded the alarm, stating that it was no longer possible to provide adequate humanitarian assistance to the Armenian residents of the Karabakh region. Up to that point, the ICRC said that it had sent 77 trucks with relief supplies since December 2022.⁵² In late July 2023, Armenia sent nineteen truckloads of food towards Laçın, but Azerbaijan refused to allow this convoy through.⁵³ On 9 September 2023, authorities of Azerbaijan and delegates of the Armenian population from the Karabakh region agreed to allow humanitarian transports to pass through along two routes.⁵⁴ A Russian Red Cross truck left Ağdam for Khankendi on 12 September 2023,⁵⁵ and an ICRC truck left Armenia for the Laçın corridor on 18 September 2023.⁵⁶

1.2.4 *Military escalation from September 2023*

On the afternoon of 19 September 2023, Azerbaijan's defence ministry declared that it was conducting an 'anti-terrorist' operation on military targets in the Karabakh region. According to this ministry, two mine explosions in Khojavand (Xocavənd) district were the immediate cause.⁵⁷ Military actions took place all along the contact line. Images circulating on social media showed artillery shelling and the deployment of drones and missiles on military targets in the Karabakh region.⁵⁸ Azerbaijani infantry forces broke through the higher defensive lines and took several strategically located military positions and sites in the Karabakh region. A ceasefire went into effect the following afternoon. The warring parties agreed that Armenian self-defence forces in the Karabakh region should fully disarm and abandon their positions.⁵⁹

⁵¹ RFE/RL, *With tightening of blockade, Azerbaijan presents Karabakh Armenians with a choice: Surrender or starve*, 31 July 2023; Eurasianet, *Nagorno-Karabakh receives first aid in months, but route to Armenia remains closed*, 13 September 2023.

⁵² ICRC, *Azerbaijan/Armenia: Sides must reach 'humanitarian consensus' to ease suffering*, 25 July 2023; ICRC, *Azerbaijan/Armenia: Humanitarian consensus allows ICRC to deliver humanitarian relief*, 18 September 2023.

⁵³ RFE/RL, *Azerbaijan blocks Armenian convoy to Nagorno-Karabakh, accuses Yerevan of 'provocation'*, 27 July 2023; Eurasianet, *Three more Armenians detained at Azerbaijan's Lachin checkpoint*, 29 August 2023.

⁵⁴ The Guardian, *Nagorno-Karabakh routes reopen in Lachin corridor deal, say Azeri and Armenian sides*, 10 September 2023; OC Media, *Nagorno-Karabakh agrees to receive Russian humanitarian aid through Aghdam*, 11 September 2023.

⁵⁵ BBC News, *Russian aid reaches beleaguered enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 12 September 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *No:479/23, Response by Aykhan Hajizada, MFA Spokesperson to the questions of the local media regarding the passage of cargo dispatched by the Russian Red Cross Society via the Aghdam-Khankendi road, as well as simultaneous use of the Aghdam-Khankendi and Lachin roads*, 12 September 2023.

⁵⁶ ICRC, *Azerbaijan/Armenia: Humanitarian consensus allows ICRC to deliver humanitarian relief*, 18 September 2023; Reuters, *Karabakh gets Red Cross aid via two routes, in step to ease crisis*, 18 September 2023; AP News, *The Red Cross: Badly needed food, medicine shipped to Azerbaijan's breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region*, 18 September 2023; Turan, *The ICRC delivered humanitarian aid to Karabakh Armenians through Lachin and Aghdam*, 18 September 2023.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Statement by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense*, 19 September 2023; BBC News, *Azerbaijan launches operation against Nagorno-Karabakh*, 19 September 2023; Turan, *Azerbaijan launches localised anti-terrorist operation in Karabakh*, 19 September 2023; Azərbaycan 24, *State Agency of Azerbaijan Automobile Roads releases information on explosion of truck on mine in Khojavand*, 19 September 2023; Report, *Footage of vehicle hit by mine in Khojavand*, 19 September 2023; AZERTAC, *Azerbaijan's Ombudsman call on international community to react to mine terror committed by Armenia*, 19 September 2023.

⁵⁸ Le Monde, *Azerbaijan launches military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 19 September 2023; The Guardian, *Azerbaijan launches 'anti-terrorist' attack in disputed Nagorno-Karabakh*, 19 September 2023; The Independent, *Israeli arms quietly helped Azerbaijan retake Nagorno-Karabakh, to the dismay of region's Armenians*, 5 October 2023.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Colonel Anar Eyvazov: 'An agreement has been reached to suspend local anti-terror measures'*, 20 September 2023; Reuters, *Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh agree to disarm*, 20 September 2023; CivilNet, *Nagorno-Karabakh surrenders to Azerbaijan, population awaits for next steps*, 20 September 2023.

On 2 October 2023, Azerbaijani police took control of the Karabakh region.⁶⁰ Confirming his authority over the region, President Aliyev raised the Azerbaijani flag in military dress on 15 October 2023 in Khankendi, as well as in several other places, including the city of Khojaly (Xocalı) and the Askeran (Əsgəran) fortress.⁶¹ A military parade also took place in Khankendi on 8 November 2023.⁶²

On 26 September 2023, the Berlin-based media outlet Meydan TV published a list containing the names of 199 Azerbaijani military personnel killed in the 'anti-terrorist' operation.⁶³ On 27 September 2023, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Health declared that 193 people had died on the Azerbaijani side, including 180 military personnel, 12 members of the internal forces and 1 civilian. The ministry further reported that 511 military personnel and 1 civilian had been injured.⁶⁴ On 11 October 2023, the Ministry of Defense published a list containing the names of 192 military personnel who had died.⁶⁵ Furthermore, according to various media reports, the military escalation on the Armenian side resulted in more than 200 fatalities, including 9 civilians.⁶⁶ In addition, according to various sources, several military personnel from the Russian peacekeeping contingent were killed on 20 September 2023 when they came under Azerbaijani fire in the Terter (Tərtər) district.⁶⁷

1.2.5

Demonstrations

The authorities imposed restrictions on freedom of assembly, often linking it to the protection of public order. In general, they did not authorise demonstrations in the capital Baku (Bakı).⁶⁸ Several small-scale peaceful demonstrations nevertheless did take place there during the reporting period. In most of these demonstrations, the police intervened quickly.⁶⁹ This was sometimes accompanied by violence and/or

⁶⁰ AP News, *Azerbaijan moves to reaffirm control of Nagorno-Karabakh as the Armenian exodus slows to a trickle*, 2 October 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Karabakh exodus nearly ends as Baku goes on with 'reintegration'*, 2 October 2023; France 24, *Gunfire in Nagorno-Karabakh persists between Armenian, Azerbaijani forces*, 2 October 2023.

⁶¹ The Independent, *Azerbaijan raises flag over the Karabakh capital to reaffirm control of the disputed region*, 15 October 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan raises flag over former breakaway Karabakh*, 16 October 2023; Euractiv, *Victorious Aliyev says fulfilled Azerbaijani 'dream' in Karabakh*, 16 October 2023.

⁶² BBC Monitoring, *Baku holds military parade in Karabakh's main town*, 8 November 2023; AP News, *Azerbaijan's president addresses a military parade in Karabakh and says 'we showed the whole world'*, 8 November 2023.

⁶³ Meydan TV, *Bir günlük hərbi əməliyyatda itkilərin sayı 200 nəfərə çatıb* (The number of casualties in the one-day military operation reaches 200), 26 September 2023; France 24, *Gunfire in Nagorno-Karabakh persists between Armenian, Azerbaijani forces*, 2 October 2023.

⁶⁴ BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan says 193 killed in Karabakh 'anti-terror operation'*, 27 September 2023; APA, *Identities of 6 servicemen who were martyred in anti-terrorist measures determined*, 28 September 2023.

⁶⁵ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *19-20.09.2023-cü il tarixlərində keçirilmiş antiterror tədbirlərində şəhid olmuş hərbi qulluqçuların siyahısı* (The list of military personnel killed in the anti-terrorist measures of 19 and 20 September 2023), <https://mod.gov.az//images/pdf/d309d12d5ca123a542e9bbd19baf81e2.pdf>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶⁶ CNN, *Azerbaijan launches operation against Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 20 September 2023; The Guardian, *Nagorno-Karabakh: ceasefire agreed after dozens killed in military offensive*, 20 September 2023; France 24, *Gunfire in Nagorno-Karabakh persists between Armenian, Azerbaijani forces*, 2 October 2023; Iravaban, *We have more than 200 dead among servicemen and civilians: Investigative Committee*, 30 October 2023; News.am, *Armenia investigative committee official: 8 of 16 persons captured by Azerbaijan are Karabakh leadership members*, 31 October 2023; Council of Europe, *Observations on the human rights situation of people affected by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region*, 12 January 2024, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Politico, *Russia reports peacekeepers killed in Nagorno-Karabakh fighting*, 20 September 2023; AA, *Russian peacekeepers 'mistakenly' killed in Karabakh, says Azerbaijan*, 21 September 2023; RFE/RL, *Top Russian officer among troops killed during Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno-Karabakh*, 21 September 2023; Turan, *Ministry of defense expressed condolences due to death of peacekeepers*, 21 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan says Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh killed by mistake*, 22 September 2023.

⁶⁸ Turan, *Baku mayor's office does not authorise the PFFA protest action*, 27 September 2022; Turan, *Party of Popular Front of Azerbaijan to hold protest action in front of Baku City Hall*, 19 October 2022; Turan, *Baku authorities again did not agree on the PFFA protest action*, 4 November 2022; HRW, *World report 2023, Azerbaijan*, 12 January 2023, p. 4; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; Turan, *Baku mayor's office refused to authorize the opposition rally*, 17 April 2024.

⁶⁹ Mikroskop Media, *Police dispersed another rally in defense of Saleh Rustamov*, 15 December 2021; Caucasian Knot, *Baku: feminists demand to investigate crimes against women*, 9 March 2022; Global Voices, *Police detains scores of activists at an opposition party rally in Azerbaijan*, 25 October 2022; Turan, *'Musavat' party reported*

mass arrests of demonstrators, for example, for failing to comply with police orders (Article 535.1 of the Code of Administrative Offences, hereinafter: CoAO). This carries a fine of 200 manat (about 107 euros) or administrative detention of up to thirty days.⁷⁰ The following are a few examples of small-scale demonstrations that took place during the reporting period. This list is by no means exhaustive.

A demonstration took place at Fountain Square in central Baku on 14 May 2022. This demonstration was against the government's negative treatment of activists. Prior to and during the demonstration, police detained at least 25 protesters. Later that day, the police left them at various locations, both inside and outside (in some cases, far outside) the city.⁷¹

On 20 July 2022, police arrested more than forty demonstrators in central Baku as they were protesting against the closing of the national borders (see 1.2.6.1). Those arrested included a member of the Müsavat Party who was on his way to this demonstration. He was given thirty days of administrative detention for failing to comply with police orders (Section 535.1 CoAO). On 5 September 2022, a member of the Popular Front Party was given 460 hours of community service for defamation (Section 147.2 Criminal Code, hereinafter: CC) and insult (section 148 CC). On 11 August 2022, she had posted on Facebook a photo of a police officer allegedly involved in the beating of the Müsavat Party member following his arrest on 20 July 2022.⁷²

On 20 February 2023, activists protested across from the Baku Appeals Court against the decision to uphold the conviction of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev (see 3.2.1.1). The police intervened violently and arrested several protesters. A court sentenced two protesters to 30 days of administrative detention for hooliganism (Section 510 CoAO) and failure to obey police orders (Section 535.1 CoAO).⁷³

Beginning on 20 June 2023, residents of the village of Söyüdlü in Gadabay (Gädäbäy) district protested against the plan to build a basin for the disposal of by-products from a nearby gold mine. In quelling these protests, internal troops from the Ministry of Internal Affairs deployed rubber bullets and tear gas. At least ten people were injured in the process. One person was fined 1,500 manat (about 800 euros), and at least seven villagers were given twenty days of administrative detention. On 22 June 2023, the police set up checkpoints along the village's exit roads, so that only villagers and pro-government journalists could enter the

short-term detentions of party activists, 12 November 2022; Turan, *Police stopped the rally of the 'Musavat' party near the Iranian embassy*, 15 November 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Feminists stage protest in Azeri capital*, 8 March 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Police disperse small protest in Azeri capital against 'sham election'*, 24 January 2024.

⁷⁰ Turan, *Elmir Abbasov, detained at the protest rally, arrested for 30 days*, 13 October 2021; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani police crack down on Baku protesters; at least 20 arrested*, 15 December 2021; JAMnews, *Azerbaijani activist goes on hunger strike while under arrest*, 4 August 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 country report Azerbaijan*, 19 March 2024, p. 10.

⁷¹ JAMnews, *No to 'criminal state' – dozens detained at protest for journalists' and activists' rights in Azerbaijan*, 14 May 2022; Mikroskop Media, *Activists protest against 'criminal state' in centrum Baku*, 16 May 2022; OC Media, *Anti-government protest allowed to go ahead in Baku*, 16 May 2022; Turan, *NCDF condemns new wave of 'politically motivated' arrests*, 23 May 2022.

⁷² Caucasian Knot, *'Musavat' Party activist Aziz Mamiyev arrested for 30 days*, 21 July 2022; Turan, *Father of the arrested activist was denied a meeting with him*, 21 July 2022; Turan, *Activist Aziz Mamiyev complains of physical pressure of police*, 22 July 2022; Turan, *Police sergeant demands punishment of opposition activist*, 20 August 2022; Turan, *Charges against PFFA activist toughened*, 24 August 2022; AIW, *Police demands arrest of a political activist*, 5 September 2022; Gözetçi, *PPFA activist sentenced to 460 hours of community service*, 6 September 2022.

⁷³ JAMnews, *Two more activists arrested in Azerbaijan*, 21 February 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani activists arrested at pro-Hajiyev protest*, 22 February 2023; IPD, *There is no freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan, as demonstrated by a court ruling*, 5 May 2023.

village.⁷⁴ In February 2024, one source stated that these checkpoints were still present at that time.⁷⁵

1.2.6 Freedom of movement

1.2.6.1 National borders

Since March 2020, the national borders with Georgia, Iran and Russia have been closed to inbound passenger traffic, allowing Azerbaijani citizens to enter their country only by plane.⁷⁶ In March 2024, the authorities decided to extend this measure until 1 July 2024.⁷⁷ During the reporting period, only the Sadarak (Sədərək) border crossing with Türkiye opened several times for residents of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic (Naxçıvan). They could travel to Türkiye and return by way of this border crossing.⁷⁸ Other citizens of Azerbaijan could only enter the country through this border crossing. It was not possible for them to leave Azerbaijan through this border crossing.⁷⁹ Border crossings with Armenia remained closed.⁸⁰ Only the border crossing at the Laçın corridor opened on 24 September 2023, allowing Armenian residents of the Karabakh region to leave for the Republic of Armenia.⁸¹

1.2.6.2 Travelling to the Karabakh region

In 2020, the Azerbaijani army captured part of the Karabakh region and seven nearby districts. During the reporting period, Azerbaijani citizens could visit this area with government permission. They could apply for this through the web portal *Yolumuz Qarabağa* (Our Road to Karabakh).⁸² In 2022 and 2023, Azerbaijani citizens and foreign tourists could generally visit the Karabakh region only through

⁷⁴ Turan, *During the dispersal of the protest in Soyudlu, 10 people were injured, 6 more were detained*, 21 June 2023; JAMnews, *The fight against the population of a village with tear gas. What happened in Soyudlu?*, 21 June 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani police lock down village after environmental protests*, 22 June 2023; Eurasianet, *Crackdown on environmental protest in Azerbaijan sparks outrage*, 23 June 2023; Global Voices, *How to silence an environmental protest Azerbaijan style*, 23 June 2023; JAMnews, *Activists who wanted to draw attention to events in Soyudlu at US embassy handed over to police*, 24 June 2023; JAMnews, *Blockade of the village of Soyudlu had been going on for ten days*, 30 June 2023; VOA, *Proposed chemical waste reservoir in Azerbaijan prompts standoff*, 6 July 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani village still under lockdown after protest, arrests continue*, 6 July 2023; IWPR, *Azerbaijani authorities crack down on eco protests*, 10 July 2023; Turan, *Youth activist Muharrem Akperov arrested in Azerbaijan for 30 days*, 17 July 2023; Meydan TV, *Söyüdlü protests: Anglo Asian Mining resumes operations in Azerbaijan amid environmental concerns*, 14 November 2023; HRW, *World report 2024, Azerbaijan*, 11 January 2024, p. 4; Forbidden Stories, *From Azerbaijan to smartphones: How tainted gold ends up in high-tech products*, 1 February 2024; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; Amnesty International, *The state of the world's human rights*, 23 April 2024, p. 88.

⁷⁵ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁷⁶ Eurasianet, *Two years on, Azerbaijan's land borders remain closed*, 29 April 2022; Turan, *Azerbaijan does not plan to open land borders – I.Aliyev*, 15 July 2022; Global Voices, *Azerbaijan continues to keep its land borders closed, citing COVID-19 as a concern*, 8 September 2023; Chaikhana, *Locked borders and open questions*, 30 October 2023.

⁷⁷ Turan, *'In our country, the extension of the quarantine regime only serves to close the border'*, 12 March 2024; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Land borders remain sealed for individuals, but not trade*, 5 April 2024.

⁷⁸ JAMnews, *Closed borders: why Azerbaijani authorities refuse to reopen land communication?*, 4 July 2022; Eurasianet, *As Armenia moves to open border with Turkey, Azerbaijan closes its own*, 5 July 2022; Eurasianet, *Georgian Azerbaijanis ask Azerbaijan's president to open border*, 24 August 2023.

⁷⁹ Trend, *Azerbaijanis studying online in Türkiye now can cross land border to Azerbaijan without permission*, 18 April 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Land borders remain sealed for individuals, but not trade*, 5 April 2024; confidential source, December 2023.

⁸⁰ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 41; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Land borders remain sealed for individuals, but not trade*, 5 April 2024.

⁸¹ Politico, *Nagorno-Karabakh exodus grows as Armenia warns of 'ethnic cleansing'*, 24 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Baku to ensure routes for disbanded army withdrawal from Karabakh*, 24 September 2023; Reuters, *Nagorno-Karabakh's Armenians start to leave en masse for Armenia*, 25 September 2023; OC Media, *'If I had wings, I would fly away': Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians seek evacuation*, 25 September 2023; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 20.

⁸² APA, *Citizens will be able to travel to Azerbaijan's Shusha, Sugovushan by private passenger cars from December 27*, 23 December 2023; APA, *Visits of Azerbaijani citizens, foreign tourists to territories liberated from occupation are facilitated*, 23 December 2023; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan enables foreign citizens to join group travel tours to Garabagh*, 24 December 2023.

organised bus tours or group tours.⁸³ For example, the authorities organised visits to the region for groups of journalists.⁸⁴ According to various sources, not every journalist was granted access to this region.⁸⁵ It was also possible to attend events in the Karabakh region. For example, the authorities organised a football match at the Khankendi stadium on 21 December 2023.⁸⁶ Beginning in the first half of 2022, authorities organised one-day bus trips for adults to the cities of Şuşa, Ağdam and Füzuli. Bus tickets could be purchased through the web portal *Yolumuz Qarabağa*. Police officers accompanied the bus passengers to ensure safety.⁸⁷ Beginning in March 2023, there were also two-day and three-day bus trips for adults to Şuşa.⁸⁸ As of 27 October 2023, there was no longer an age limit for visiting Şuşa.⁸⁹ According to one source, IDPs (see 4.1) were sometimes allowed to travel to their original place of residence in their own cars or by bus.⁹⁰ Beginning 27 December 2023, a limited number of citizens were allowed to visit the city of Şuşa and the village of Suqovuşan in Terter district daily with their own cars.⁹¹ Beginning 27 April 2024, the city of Laçın was added as a destination.⁹²

1.2.6.3 Travel ban

During the reporting period, several conscientious objectors (see 3.1.2.6), political opponents (see 3.1.3), relatives of political opponents (see 3.1.3.5), human rights activists (see 3.2.1.1), relatives of human rights activists (see 3.2.1.4), journalists (see 3.2.1.5), relatives of journalists (see 3.2.1.6) and human rights lawyers (see 3.3.2.2) were subject to a travel ban.⁹³

A report on travel bans was published in early 2019 by the Azerbaijani NGO Educational Centre for Election Monitoring and Democracy (*Seçkilərin Monitorinqi və Demokratiyanın Tədrisi Mərkəzi*, SMDT), headed by Anar Məmmədli (Anar Məmmədli), who had been arrested on 29 April 2024.⁹⁴ This report was prepared

⁸³ Eurasianet, *The mammoth task of demining Azerbaijan*, 11 September 2023; Report, *Traveler: After solving landmine problem, Karabakh to become popular among tourists*, 6 November 2023; AZERTAC, *Ghanaian traveler: Azerbaijan is doing pretty well to deactivate the landmines in its territories*, 6 November 2023; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan enables foreign citizens to join group travel tours to Garabagh*, 24 December 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁸⁴ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Media tours were organized on the eve of the second anniversary of the Patriotic War*, 7 November 2022; AZERTAC, *Journalists observe demining process in Azerbaijan's Aghdara*, 15 December 2023.

⁸⁵ EFJ, *Azerbaijan: freedom of movement for journalists in Karabakh must be guaranteed*, 25 July 2023; confidential source, November 2023.

⁸⁶ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Historic day: FC Qarabag vs MOIK Baku president Ilham Aliyev delivered speech at Khankendi stadium*, 21 December 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijan holds football match in Nagorno-Karabakh*, 22 December 2023.

⁸⁷ Mikroskop Media, *Azerbaijan launches paid routes to Shusha and Aghdam*, 20 January 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan launches first tourist buses to Karabakh*, 24 January 2022; Trend, *Azerbaijan announces date of ticket sale for regular trips to Shusha and Aghdam*, 23 May 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

⁸⁸ AzerNews, *State Tourism Agency launches trips to Shusha*, 3 March 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan launches multi-day tours of Shusha*, 21 March 2023.

⁸⁹ Turan, *The age limit for visiting the liberated areas has been lifted*, 26 October 2023; Caliber.Az, *Azerbaijan lifts age restrictions for visiting Karabakh*, 26 October 2023.

⁹⁰ Confidential source, December 2023.

⁹¹ APA, *Citizens will be able to travel to Azerbaijan's Shusha, Sugovushan by private passenger cars from December 27*, 23 December 2023; Trend, *Travel to liberated territories of Azerbaijan to be simplified*, 23 December 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁹² APA, *Azerbaijani citizens to be able to visit liberated Lachin in their cars*, 25 April 2024; Trend, *Azerbaijan greenlights nationals to drive up its liberated Lachin*, 25 April 2024.

⁹³ WRI, *Conscientious objection to military service 2017-2022*, 22 March 2022, p. 10; VOA, *Azerbaijan issues travel ban for journalist*, 1 April 2022; JAMnews, *Wife of political emigrant arrested in Azerbaijan banned from leaving country*, 26 August 2022; JFJ, *Attacks on media workers in Azerbaijan in 2022*, 9 November 2023; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 38; European Parliament, *Human rights breaches in Azerbaijan, The Gambia and Hong Kong*, 25 April 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁹⁴ RFE/RL, *Head of independent Election Monitor detained in Azerbaijan*, 29 April 2024; Turan, *The police also searched the parental home of Anar Məmmədli*, 29 April 2024; JAMnews, *Azerbaijan: Eighth arrest in the 'Abzas*

based on interviews with 30 people who had been subject to travel bans, including 18 journalists and 5 political activists. An appendix to this report contained the names of 35 people who were subject to travel bans. These were individuals who had been critical of the government.⁹⁵ Furthermore, in its 2024 annual report, Freedom House stated that the government had restricted freedom of movement — and especially travel abroad — for political opponents, for journalists and for civil society activists. Although the travel ban was lifted for some dissidents in 2019, many others remained in place, including for some political prisoners who had been released that year. Others fled the country to avoid further persecution. According to Freedom House, some travel bans remained in place in 2023 and had been extended to the families of political emigrants.⁹⁶ It is not possible to further quantify how often travel bans were imposed during the reporting period. According to one source, a list containing the names of all people subject to travel bans did not exist.⁹⁷

Media case', 30 April 2024; Euractiv, *Azerbaijan puts activist in pre-trial custody on smuggling charge he denies*, 1 May 2024.

⁹⁵ SMDT, *Freedom of movement in Azerbaijan: Politically motivated travel bans. Assessment report*, 20 February 2019.

⁹⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024.

⁹⁷ Confidential source, May 2024.

2 Identity and documents

2.1 Compulsory identification, ID and travel documents

2.1.1 Identification requirement

During the reporting period, Azerbaijani citizens were not required to carry an identity card with them at all times.⁹⁸ This obligation applied only when there was a curfew during a state of martial law.⁹⁹ Police were allowed to ask citizens on the street for proof of identity if there was a reasonable suspicion that the person in question had committed an offence or crime.¹⁰⁰

2.1.2 Identity documents

The identity card and the passport count as identity documents.¹⁰¹ According to the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on identification document of citizen of the Azerbaijan Republic, every citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan who reaches the age of fifteen years or a person who acquires citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan must apply for an identity card within one month.¹⁰² In late 2015, Article 9 was added to this Act. Under this provision, the identity card would become mandatory for every citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan, including children under fifteen years of age. This plan failed in 2021.¹⁰³ See 3.1.6.3 for information about identity cards for minors.

2.1.3 Travel documents

The passport, which is generally valid for ten years, counts as a travel document.¹⁰⁴ Other travel documents include the *laissez passer* and the travel document issued by the State Migration Service (Dövlət Miqrasiya Xidməti, DMX) to recognised refugees and stateless persons.¹⁰⁵ During the reporting period, Azerbaijani citizens could also travel directly to Türkiye with a valid identity card.¹⁰⁶ See 3.1.6.4 of this Country of Origin Information Report for information on passports for minors.

⁹⁸ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

⁹⁹ Article 1.0.4 and Article 10.1.19 of the Law on Martial Law; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Section 17(2) of the Law on Police.

¹⁰¹ Article 1 of the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on identification document of citizen of the Azerbaijan Republic; Article 3 of the Passports Act.

¹⁰² Article 1 of the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on identification document of citizen of the Azerbaijan Republic.

¹⁰³ Under Article 9 of this law, the identity card was required for every citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan, including children younger than fifteen years of age, was compulsory as of 1 September 2018. In June 2018, the effective date changed to 1 January 2020. Then, in July 2019, the effective date was changed to 1 January 2022. In December 2021, the parliament decided to remove Article 9 from the law; Legislative amendment of 29 December 2015 (Law number 86-VQD); Report, *Identity cards will be issued to Azerbaijani citizens under 15*, 8 December 2015; Legislative amendment of 29 June 2018 (Law number 1217-VQD); Legislative amendment of 12 July 2019 (Law number 1666-VQD); Report, *Entry into force of Law 'on issue of identity card of citizen of the Azerbaijan under 15' postponed*, 12 July 2019; Legislative amendment of 20 December 2021 (Law number 432-VIQD); Trend, *Azerbaijani parliament to consider amendment to law on ID cards*, 19 November 2021; Trend, *Azerbaijan may cancel individual ID cards for its U-15 citizens*, 19 November 2021.

¹⁰⁴ In addition to regular passports, this could include service passports or diplomatic passports (Section 3 of the Passports Act).

¹⁰⁵ DMX, *Presentation of 'travel document' to persons who obtained refugee status in Azerbaijan and www.migrationto.az website held*, 23 January 2020; IOM, *Non-citizens receive right-to-travel documents from Azeri state migration services*, 7 February 2020; Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the Republic of Türkiye, *Travel document*, <https://ankara.mfa.gov.az/en/content/43/qayidis-sehadetnamesi>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

¹⁰⁶ DMX, *As of April 1 citizens of Azerbaijan and Turkey can also use biometric ID cards for border crossing*, 31 March 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, *Countries whose citizens are allowed to enter Türkiye with their national ID's*, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/countries-whose-citizens-are-allowed-to-enter-T%C3%BCrkiye-with-their-national-id_s.en.mfa, consulted on 15 May 2024.

2.2 Document fraud

Illegally produced and issued documents occurred in Azerbaijan during the reporting period.¹⁰⁷ These included false medical certificates and false certificates from foreign educational institutions that conscripts used to obtain a deferment or exemption from military service.¹⁰⁸ There were also several reports of false legal documents.¹⁰⁹

2.2.1 *Visa-related fraud*

According to several sources, visa-related fraud occurred in Azerbaijani cases.¹¹⁰ According to one source, this fraud was less related to the actual visas than to the underlying documents submitted by applicants.¹¹¹

In connection with this type of fraud, the Azerbaijani Public Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case against the head of a travel agency and some of his employees in 2021. This travel agency had provided support in obtaining visas. On 26 October 2022, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced this head to seven years, seven months and fourteen days in prison for charges including organised fraud (Article 178.3.1 CC) and bribery (Article 312 CC). On 22 June 2023, an appellate court acquitted him of bribery, after which the court reduced his sentence by six months.¹¹²

2.2.2 *Asylum-related fraud*

According to various sources, asylum-related fraud occurred in Azerbaijani asylum cases, including with purchased asylum stories.¹¹³ One source pointed to the use of false supporting documents (e.g. fake police calls).¹¹⁴ Another source pointed to the submission by asylum seekers of links to web pages containing false information.¹¹⁵

In 2016, the Public Prosecutor's Office in Azerbaijan launched a criminal investigation into allegations that asylum seekers with false Müsavat Party documents (see 3.1.3.3) were seeking asylum in Europe. This investigation was not completed during the reporting period. In connection with this case, the authorities arrested Tofiq Yaqublu, a well-known member of the Müsavat Party, on 14 December 2023. He was also a member of the opposition movement National Council of Democratic Forces (*Demokratik Qüvvələrin Milli Şurası, DQMS*). The charges were based on Section 178.3.2 CC (scam), Section 320.1 CC (document forgery) and Section 320.2 (use of forged documents). According to Yaqublu, this

¹⁰⁷ State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *The members of the transnational criminal gang manufacturing fake documents related to a foreign country were detained*, 15 January 2024; Report, *Azerbaijan's Security Service detains transnational criminal group engaged in making fake foreign documents*, 15 January 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan exposes gang selling counterfeit Ukrainian passports*, 15 January 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Global Voices, *'Unfit for military service': How Azerbaijan stigmatizes LGBTQ+ military personnel*, 26 November 2021; Turan, *Hematology centre issued fake certificates to obtain disability and evade military service*, 18 December 2023; Trend, *Azerbaijan exposes illegal actions of a person producing false documents*, 6 February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁰⁹ State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *People making false electronic documents to release prisoners exposed*, 20 July 2022; Turan, *Group making false documents to commute sentences for prisoners is exposed*, 20 July 2022; State Security Service of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *The person who prepared fake documents on behalf of the courts was detained*, 25 August 2023.

¹¹⁰ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

¹¹¹ Confidential source, February 2024.

¹¹² Meydan TV, *European Movement Azerbaijan chair Ramin Hajili arrested*, 29 October 2021; Turan, *Ramin Hajili sentenced to 7 years and 7 months*, 26 October 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

¹¹³ Meydan TV, *Europe at all costs: The pitfalls of pursuing a better life abroad*, 29 October 2021; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, November 2023.

¹¹⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

¹¹⁵ Confidential source, November 2023.

was a false accusation, and his arrest was related to his political activities. At the end of the reporting period, no verdict was known in his case.¹¹⁶

In 2019, German authorities suspected a number of individuals, including the chair of the Müsavat Europe Coordination Centre (*Müsavat Avropa Koordinasiya Mərkəzi*, Müsavat AKM), of smuggling Azerbaijani nationals for payment and committing document fraud for the purpose of asylum applications.¹¹⁷ According to one source, one of the suspects had posted on Facebook that the charges had subsequently been dropped.¹¹⁸ This message could not be verified. As far as could be ascertained, no individuals had been convicted in this case.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Mikroskop Media, *Azerbaijani political activist arrested after being deported from Germany*, 21 April 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Opposition activist swept up in arrests wave ahead of presidential election*, 15 December 2023; Turan, *Tofiq Yagublu was detained. Why do arrests occur? – Seymour Hazi in a 'difficult question'*, 15 December 2023; JAMnews, *Azerbaijan: arrests continue*, 15 December 2023; IRFS, *Tofiq Yagublu denies claims of 'fraud' and 'forgery of documents' – lawyer*, 15 December 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Court arrests Azeri dissident on fraud charge*, 16 December 2023; HRW, *Azerbaijan: Prominent opposition figure arrested*, 19 December 2023; IPD, *Tofiq Yagublu, an opposition activist is being regularly arrested*, 14 February 2024; Turan, *Tofiq Yagublu's arrest period has been extended for another 2 months*, 6 April 2024; JAMnews, *Prominent Azerbaijani opposition figure remains under arrest*, 16 April 2024; confidential source, November 2023.

¹¹⁷ RFE/RL, *Germany repatriates dozens of Azerbaijani nationals amid alleged roundup*, 15 November 2019; Trend, *German court: Shocking facts about profiteering from Azerbaijani immigrants*, 20 November 2019; Turan, *Chingiz Sultanov: 'Why should I believe the words of' fighter for the truth 'Rashad Mammadov?'*, 30 November 2019; Turan, *German police released Alovzat Aliyev on bail*, 13 February 2020.

¹¹⁸ Confidential source, November 2023.

¹¹⁹ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, December 2023.

3 Human rights

3.1 Position of specific groups

3.1.1 Ethnic groups

According to information from the State Statistics Committee (*Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi*, DSK), the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan on 1 January 2023 numbered more than ten million people.¹²⁰ The 2019 census revealed that 94.8% of the population counted as Azerbaijani. The rest identified themselves as belonging to one of the many other ethnic groups, including Russians, Ukrainians, Avars, Turks, Tats, Tsachurs, Georgians, Tatars, Jews and Udin.¹²¹ Several thousand Roma were also living in Azerbaijan.¹²² This section proceeds with a more detailed discussion of the position of Lezgins, Talysh and Armenians.

The Constitution recognises the right to maintain one's ethnic identity, including the prohibition of forced change of ethnicity, as well as the right to education in one's own language.¹²³ There is nevertheless no specific law guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of ethnic groups. Some laws do affect these rights, however, including the Law on Education and the General Law on Education.¹²⁴ Both of these laws stress that Azerbaijani is the language of instruction.¹²⁵ According to the legislation, teaching in minority or foreign languages is allowed, as long as it also includes the teaching of Azerbaijani language, literature, history and geography.¹²⁶ Furthermore, the Law on State Language in the Republic of Azerbaijan is almost entirely devoted to the Azerbaijani language. The legislation does not provide for any form of protection and development of the languages of other population groups.¹²⁷

3.1.1.1 Lezgins

Lezgins live mainly in the north-eastern districts of Qusar, Quba and Khaçmaz (Xaçmaz). Most Lezgins are Sunni Muslims.¹²⁸ According to the 2019 census, 167,600 people (1.7% of the population) are counted as Lezgins.¹²⁹ In school, they could take classes in their language once a week for two hours from first to ninth grade.¹³⁰ According to government information, in the 2020/2021 school year, 8,005 pupils in 95 schools were taught in the Lezgian language.¹³¹ Several sources indicated that Lezgins generally experienced no barriers and/or severe discrimination in daily life due to their ethnicity.¹³²

¹²⁰ DSK, *Population of Azerbaijan, 2022*, 31 May 2023, p. 11.

¹²¹ DSK, *Population of Azerbaijan, 2022*, 31 May 2023, p. 21.

¹²² Meydan TV, *Traditions or stereotypes?*, 1 March 2023; RFE/RL, *'Should we sit at home and die of hunger?' Azerbaijani Roma say they have no choice to beg*, 27 April 2023.

¹²³ Article 2 (right to self-determination), Article 25 (equality), Article 42 (right to education), Article 44 (right to national identity) and Article 45 (use of native language) of the Constitution.

¹²⁴ BRI, *Legal regulation of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan*, 2 October 2023; BBC News Russian, *Azerbaijan's ethnic minorities: troubled co-existence*, 15 November 2023.

¹²⁵ Article 7.1 of the Law on Education; Article 6.1 of the General Law on Education.

¹²⁶ Article 7.2 of the Law on Education; Article 6.3 of the General Law on Education.

¹²⁷ BRI, *Legal regulation of ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan*, 2 October 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Authorities worry language is an instrument of subversion*, 1 March 2024.

¹²⁸ BRI, *The loss of minority language schooling in the South Caucasus*, 14 August 2023.

¹²⁹ DSK, *Population of Azerbaijan, 2022*, 31 May 2023, p. 21.

¹³⁰ Council of Europe, *Fifth periodic report*, 17 October 2022, p. 6; BRI, *The loss of minority language schooling in the South Caucasus*, 14 August 2023.

¹³¹ Council of Europe, *Fifth periodic report*, 17 October 2022, p. 7.

¹³² Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

3.1.1.2

Talysh

Talysh live mainly in the south-eastern districts of Lankaran (Lənkəran), Astara, Masallı and Lerik, as well as in the cities of Baku and Sumqayıt. Most Talysh are Shiite Muslims.¹³³ According to the 2009 census, 112,000 people (1.3% of the population) identified as Talysh. The 2019 census revealed that 87,600 people (0.9% of the population) identified as Talysh.¹³⁴ According to the Public Council of Azerbaijan Talysh (*Azərbaycan Talışları İctimai Şurası*, ATİŞ), an informal organisation that advocates for Talysh rights, the actual number of Talysh was much higher.¹³⁵ In November 2023, ATİŞ also agitated against the proposal to declare Lankaran the youth capital of the Turkic world in 2024, as this city was predominantly home to Talysh. ATİŞ failed to register officially with the Ministry of Justice.¹³⁶ In some schools, Talysh in the south-eastern districts from first to fourth grade were taught in their own language for one hour a week.¹³⁷ According to information from the government, 20,240 students in 254 schools were taught in Talysh in the 2020/2021 school year. New textbooks appeared during the reporting period.¹³⁸ According to one source, Talysh generally experienced no obstacles and/or severe discrimination in daily life due to their ethnicity.¹³⁹

3.1.1.3

Armenians

According to the 2019 census, around two hundred ethnic Armenians were living in Azerbaijan at that time. This did not include Armenians in the areas not under the control of Azerbaijani authorities at the time.¹⁴⁰ Because people of Armenian descent generally did not present themselves as such, it was not known how many Armenians were actually residing in Azerbaijan during the reporting period.¹⁴¹ According to various sources, most of them were elderly women who had remained in Azerbaijan after the First Karabakh War (1991-1994) and were married to Azerbaijani men. They had integrated into the Azerbaijani population. In general, they kept their Armenian ethnicity hidden. After the First Karabakh War, almost all of them had changed their names to Azerbaijani names. In their way of life and language, they were no different from Azerbaijanis. As a result, within Azerbaijani society, they were no longer recognisable as Armenians.¹⁴² Several sources suspected that, if individuals were to actively disclose their Armenian origin, it would initially be received negatively in society.¹⁴³ In the media (including social media) and in textbooks, Armenians were presented primarily as the historical enemies who had been defeated in the recent past.¹⁴⁴

¹³³ Karli-Jo Storm, Discursive-technical landscaping and policing the body (politic) in Azerbaijan: a case study of Talysh activists, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 17 November 2023, p. 7; confidential source, October 2023.

¹³⁴ DSK, *Population of Azerbaijan, 2022*, 31 May 2023, p. 21.

¹³⁵ OC Media, *Talysh organisation slams alleged discrimination by Azerbaijani government*, 29 September 2021; Karli-Jo Storm, Discursive-technical landscaping and policing the body (politic) in Azerbaijan, 17 November 2023, p. 7.

¹³⁶ AzerNews, *OTS accepts Lankaran's candidacy for '2024 youth capital of Turkish world'*, 10 November 2023; Karli-Jo Storm, Discursive-technical landscaping and policing the body (politic) in Azerbaijan, 17 November 2023, p. 12; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Authorities worry language is an instrument of subversion*, 1 March 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

¹³⁷ Council of Europe, *Fifth periodic report*, 17 October 2022, p. 6; confidential source, October 2023.

¹³⁸ Council of Europe, *Fifth periodic report*, 17 October 2022, p. 7; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 42.

¹³⁹ Confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁴⁰ DSK, *Population of Azerbaijan, 2022*, 31 May 2023, p. 21.

¹⁴¹ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁴² Azeri Daily, *General Harutyunyan's sister in Kurdamir: My brother didn't know that my son was in Azerbaijani trenches' (human tragedy)*, 8 November 2020; Trend, *Sister of former Armenian defense minister Arutunyan lives in Azerbaijan – President Aliyev*, 9 November 2020; AzerNews, *Armenia's long and tiresome dispute on Karabakh turns into farce*, 3 July 2023; confidential source, October 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁴³ Confidential source, October 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁴⁴ CERD, *Concluding observations on the combined tenth to twelfth periodic reports of Azerbaijan (CERD/C/AZE/CO/10-12)*, 22 September 2022, p. 8; Open Democracy, *What's next for the Azerbaijani blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh?*, 25 January 2023; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan (sixth monitoring cycle)*. Adopted on

In the afternoon of 19 September 2023, the Azerbaijani army launched an 'anti-terrorist' operation on military targets in the Karabakh region. On 20 September 2023, the warring parties agreed that Armenian self-defence forces in the Karabakh region would fully disarm and abandon their positions. Despite the fact that civilians had not been targets of this operation, a mass exodus of Armenians from the Karabakh region by way of the Lachin corridor occurred almost immediately.¹⁴⁵ On 1 October 2023, Armenian authorities declared that the last bus with fifteen passengers had arrived in the Armenian city of Goris.¹⁴⁶ According to the UNHCR and Armenian authorities, 101,848 people from the Karabakh region arrived in Armenia in a few days.¹⁴⁷ According to UNICEF, this included about 30,000 children.¹⁴⁸ A number of Armenians from the Karabakh region were in possession of passports from the Republic of Armenia containing the code '070'. These passports could serve as identity documents through which document holders could confirm that they had temporary protection or refugee status in Armenia. According to the Armenian authorities, possession of these travel documents did not mean that they had the nationality of the Republic of Armenia.¹⁴⁹

During the 2023 exodus, Azerbaijani authorities arrested eight Armenian political and military leaders from the Karabakh region. They were still in detention at the end of the reporting period.¹⁵⁰

According to the United Nations International Court of Justice (ICJ), Azerbaijan had to guarantee the safety of the ethnic Armenian inhabitants of the Karabakh region. On 17 November 2023, in a case brought by Armenia, the ICJ granted interim measures stipulating that Azerbaijan had to ensure the safe return of people who

29 March 2023, 21 June 2023, p. 10; UNGA, *Azerbaijan. Compilation of information prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/WG.6/44/AZE/2)*, 31 August 2023, p. 6; EVN Report, *Baku QAnon: The new high armenophobia*, 23 October 2023; BBC News Russian, *Azerbaijan's ethnic minorities: troubled co-existence*, 15 November 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; confidential source, October 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁴⁵ Politico, *Nagorno-Karabakh exodus grows as Armenia warns of 'ethnic cleansing'*, 24 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Baku to ensure routes for disbanded army withdrawal from Karabakh*, 24 September 2023; The Independent, *Almost all of Nagorno-Karabakh's people have left, Armenia's government says*, 30 September 2023; BBC News, *Ethnic Armenian journalist reports from refugee traffic jam*, 1 October 2023; BBC News, *Deserted Nagorno-Karabakh reveals aftermath of lightning-fast Armenian defeat*, 3 October 2023.

¹⁴⁶ DW, *Last bus leaves Nagorno-Karabakh, deadly clashes continue*, 2 October 2023; OC Media, *The last bus out of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 6 October 2023.

¹⁴⁷ UNHCR, *Armenia emergency refugee response. Inter-agency update, 20 October – 30 October 2023*, 6 November 2023, p. 2; Council of Europe, *Observations on the human rights situation of people affected by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region*, 12 January 2024, p. 5.

¹⁴⁸ UNICEF, *Armenia. Humanitarian situation report No. 2 09 October 2023*, 13 October 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Eurasianet, *Armenia to offer refugee status to displaced Karabakhis*, 30 October 2023; JAMnews, *NK Armenians face choice of Armenian citizenship or refugee status*, 1 November 2023; CivilNet, *Confusion over the legal status of Karabakh refugees*, 6 November 2023; Council of Europe, *Observations on the human rights situation of people affected by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region*, 12 January 2024, p. 7.

¹⁵⁰ BBC Monitoring, *Baku confirms detention of Russian-Armenian billionaire in Karabakh*, 27 September 2023; The Guardian, *Former state minister of Nagorno-Karabakh arrested by Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Baku charges Russian-Armenian billionaire with financing terrorism*, 28 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan puts nearly 300 'separatists' on wanted list*, 28 September 2023; Euractiv, *Azerbaijan arrests former top Karabakh chief as exodus tops 50,000*, 28 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan detains two Karabakh military officials*, 29 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan detains two Karabakh military officials*, 29 September 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan detains one more Karabakh separatist official*, 30 September 2023; The Independent, *Azerbaijan issues arrest warrant for former separatist Nagorno-Karabakh leader*, 1 October 2023; APA, *Bako Sahakyan, Arkady Gukasyan, David Ishkhanyan were detained and brought to Baku*, 3 October 2023; The Independent, *Azerbaijan arrests several former top separatist leaders of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 3 October 2023; APA, *Azerbaijan detains Arayik Harutyunyan – so-called former 'leader' of separatists in Garabagh*, 3 October 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Baku charges Karabakh ex-leader with war crimes, terrorism*, 5 October 2023; AZERTAC, *Azerbaijan extends arrest term for Armenian separatists Arayik Harutyunyan, Ghukasyan, Saakyan, and others by four months*, 25 January 2024; AP News, *A former Russian tycoon who once led separatist region launches a hunger strike in Azerbaijan jail*, 19 April 2024; Caliber.Az, *Baku court extends preventive measures for Karabakh regime 'president'*, 14 May 2024.

had left the Karabakh region after 19 September 2023. People who had remained in the Karabakh region or had just returned had to be free from violence or intimidation, and their documentation and registration had to be protected and respected.¹⁵¹ In February 2024, one source stated that 20 Armenians had remained in the Karabakh region at that time: 16 in Khankendi and 4 in the surrounding villages.¹⁵² They could go to Khankendi for a hot meal at a shelter of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Azerbaijan. A mobile supermarket and a functioning hospital were also available to them.¹⁵³

On 28 September 2023, the State Migration Service launched the web portal *reintegration.gov.az* to facilitate return. This allowed Armenians from the Karabakh region to apply.¹⁵⁴ According to several sources, this website had been blocked in the Republic of Armenia.¹⁵⁵ On 4 October 2023, the State Migration Service reported that 98 applications had been filed thus far.¹⁵⁶ There were no reports that any Armenians had returned to the Karabakh region from abroad after 19 September 2023.

3.1.2 *Compulsory military service*

Conscripts are male citizens between 18 and 35 years of age who are initially registered for military service or those who have not completed their compulsory military service in full.¹⁵⁷ The compulsory military service also applies to male nationals living abroad who belong to the aforementioned group.¹⁵⁸ Male nationals who have reached the age of 35 years can no longer be called up to fulfil their compulsory military service.¹⁵⁹ Women are not subject to compulsory military service.¹⁶⁰ Women between the ages of nineteen and forty years can nevertheless serve in the army on a voluntary basis.¹⁶¹

3.1.2.1 Initial military registration

From January to March, all male nationals who will reach the age of fifteen years in that year are required to report for initial military registration at one of the district offices of the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription (*Səfərbərlik və Hərbi Xidmətə Çağırış üzrə Dövlət Xidməti*, SHXÇDX).¹⁶² The service issues individual calls for this purpose. Boys who have been called up must produce a number of documents, including a copy of the birth certificate and six passport photographs.¹⁶³ The Amendment of 20 December 2022 (Law number 737-VIQD) amended Article

¹⁵¹ ICJ, *Order of 17 November 2023*, 17 November 2023.

¹⁵² Confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁵³ Trend, *Azerbaijan keeping on medical services in Khankendi – TABIB*, 9 October 2023; Turan, *Armenians in Karabakh live in a special shelter and outside of this institution*, 29 April 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁵⁴ AzerNews, *Azerbaijan launches web portal for reintegration of Armenian community in Garabagh*, 28 September 2023; News.az, *Azerbaijan creates web portal for reintegration of Garabagh's Armenian residents*, 28 September 2023; Turan, *Karabakh Armenians are invited to register electronically and use Azerbaijan's public services*, 28 September 2023.

¹⁵⁵ AZERTAC, *State service: Armenia blocks sustainable reintegration of Armenian residents into Azerbaijani society*, 4 October 2023; Turan, *Armenian providers blocked access to domain reintegration.gov.az*, 4 October 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁵⁶ AzerNews, *Some 98 applications registered via portal in order to join reintegration process*, 4 October 2023; Council of Europe, *Observations on the human rights situation of people affected by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region*, 12 January 2024, p. 9.

¹⁵⁷ Article 2.0.8 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁵⁸ Article 12.8 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; Trend, *President Ilham Aliyev signs decree on conscription to active military service*, 21 February 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Article 18.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁶⁰ Article 2.0.12 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁶¹ Article 3.4 and Article 36.1.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁶² Article 6.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; DCAF, *The rights of conscripts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus: A review of legislation and practice*, 29 June 2021, p. 26.

¹⁶³ Article 6.4 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

6.4 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service. A note to Section 6.4 of this Act states that these documents will not be requested if they can also be retrieved through the information system *E-government* (www.e-gov.az).¹⁶⁴ Medical examinations and psychological examinations are performed to determine their suitability for military service.¹⁶⁵ Upon completion, the boys receive a certificate of initial military registration.¹⁶⁶

3.1.2.2

Call-up rounds

Every three months, cohorts of conscripts, who are between the ages of 18 and 35 years and have no deferment or exemption, are called up in thirty-day rounds.¹⁶⁷ These call-up rounds usually start on 1 January, 1 April, 1 July and 1 October. Each call-up round begins at the decree of the president.¹⁶⁸ When a conscript answers a call, he undergoes a medical examination and a drug test.¹⁶⁹ One possible outcome is that the person may be deemed fit to perform his military service.¹⁷⁰ A person may also be granted a temporary deferral for medical reasons.¹⁷¹ Further, an individual may be granted exemption in peacetime or exemption in both wartime and peacetime.¹⁷²

3.1.2.3

Deferral

There are five grounds for deferral of military service. Deferral is possible due to special family circumstances, due to temporary health reasons, due to studies, due to participation as a candidate in parliamentary or local elections, or due to holding certain positions (e.g. being a member of the National Assembly or a municipal council, a judge or an ombudsman).¹⁷³ Article 19 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service includes further explanation of special family circumstances.¹⁷⁴ Article 20 concerns health reasons. Article 21 addresses studies.¹⁷⁵

3.1.2.4

Temporarily unable to be called up

Conscripts are temporarily unable to be called up if their criminal conviction has yet to be executed, if criminal proceedings are pending against them or if they are in detention.¹⁷⁶

3.1.2.5

Exemption

Several categories of individuals are exempted from regular military service in peacetime. These include citizens with doctoral degrees.¹⁷⁷ They further include conscripts who are not fit for active military service in peacetime due to a permanent health condition, or who have been deemed unfit for military service in

¹⁶⁴ AzerNews, *Azerbaijan approves amendment to law 'on military duty & military service'*, 8 February 2023.

¹⁶⁵ Article 6.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; DCAF, *The rights of conscripts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus*, 29 June 2021, p. 26.

¹⁶⁶ Article 6.5 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁶⁷ Article 12.2.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁶⁸ Article 12.3 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; Trend, *Azerbaijan continues admission of new conscripts in military units*, 15 January 2024; Trend, *President Ilham Aliyev signs decree on conscription to active military service*, 21 February 2024; Trend, *Conscription for compulsory active military duty kicks off in Azerbaijan*, 1 April 2024.

¹⁶⁹ Article 15.1 and Article 15.1-1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; Trend, *Azerbaijan amends law 'on military duty and military service'*, 30 December 2023; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan changes procedure for deciding on military eligibility of citizens*, 30 December 2023.

¹⁷⁰ Article 15.2.1 and Article 15.2.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁷¹ Article 15.2.3 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁷² Article 15.2.4 and Article 15.2.5 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁷³ Article 18.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁷⁴ It follows from Section 19 of this Act that this may include conscripts with three or more children or conscripts who are the sole caregiver for a family member with a first-degree disability.

¹⁷⁵ The legislative amendment of 5 May 2022 (Law number 524-VIQD) adds the word 'adjunct' (adyunkt) to Article 21.1.4 after the word 'doctoral candidate'.

¹⁷⁶ Article 22 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁷⁷ Article 23.0.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

peacetime and of limited fitness for military service in wartime due to their health condition, or who are unfit for military service in both peacetime and wartime due to their health condition.¹⁷⁸ This also includes conscripts who have not completed the period of active military service before reaching the age of 35 years for various reasons.¹⁷⁹ Other categories include citizens who have been naturalised and have previously served or been granted exemption in the country where they previously held citizenship.¹⁸⁰

3.1.2.6 Alternative compulsory national service

Part 2 of Article 76 of the Constitution provides for an alternative compulsory national service that must be regulated by law. The Law on Military Duty and Military Service also mentions this option.¹⁸¹ During the reporting period, no law on alternative compulsory national service was passed, thus making alternative compulsory national service impossible in practice.¹⁸² According to various sources, more than ten Jehovah's Witnesses who had invoked the right to perform alternative compulsory national service faced being unable to obtain passports due to the lack of a military booklet, a travel ban imposed by the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription, with the associated call-ups and repeated medical examinations.¹⁸³

3.1.2.7 Active military service

The authorities use a computer program to distribute conscripts across military units.¹⁸⁴ The period of service begins on the day the conscript is sent to the military unit.¹⁸⁵ In the first forty days of service, a conscript receives basic military training. This initial training is followed by a ceremonial oath-taking.¹⁸⁶ Conscripts may not be assigned combat duties or deployed in military operations until after they have taken the military oath. Only then may they be provided with weapons and military equipment.¹⁸⁷ The compulsory national service lasts eighteen months. For conscripts with higher education degrees, it lasts twelve months.¹⁸⁸

¹⁷⁸ Article 23.0.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁷⁹ Article 23.0.3 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁸⁰ Article 23.0.5 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁸¹ Article 3.3 and Article 23.0.4 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁸² DCAF, *The rights of conscripts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus*, 29 June 2021, p. 26; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Alternative service 'not under discussion' despite latest ECHR decision*, 5 November 2021; Permanent Mission of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the UN Office and other international organizations, *Information of the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 21 March 2022; JW, *Information on conscientious objection to military service involving Jehovah's Witnesses*, 21 March 2022, p. 3; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Conscientious objector's jail term changed to suspended sentence*, 16 December 2022.

¹⁸³ JW, *Information on conscientious objection to military service involving Jehovah's Witnesses*, 21 March 2022; WRI, *Conscientious objection to military service 2017-2022*, 22 March 2022, p. 10; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Conscientious objector's jail term changed to suspended sentence*, 16 December 2022; USCIRF, *Annual report 2023*, 1 May 2023, p. 51; European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, *Azerbaijan. Contribution for the 44th session of the Universal Periodic Review (6-17 November 2023)*, 5 April 2023, pp. 6-7.

¹⁸⁴ AZERTAC, *Defense ministry: Process of distributing conscripts to military units conducted*, 22 July 2022; APA, *Azerbaijan army continues the process of conscripts' admission*, 5 October 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Conscripts distributed to military units*, 23 January 2024; Trend, *Azerbaijan assigns conscripts to military units*, 23 January 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Article 37.1.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁸⁶ Article 29 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Military oath-taking ceremonies were held in the Azerbaijan army*, 8 November 2022; AZERTAC, *Military oath-taking ceremonies held in Azerbaijan army, defense ministry*, 12 November 2023; AZERTAC, *Military oath-taking ceremony for young soldiers was held in Azerbaijani combined arms army*, 19 February 2024.

¹⁸⁷ Article 29.3 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

¹⁸⁸ Article 38.1.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Conscientious objector jailing 'very unexpected decision'*, 29 September 2022; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Conscientious objector's jail term changed to suspended sentence*, 16 December 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

3.1.2.8

Deployment of conscripts in military actions

During the reporting period, conscripts were deployed in several military actions. This follows in part from a list published by the Ministry of Defense in September 2022. This list contained the names of 80 military personnel who had died in the September 2022 military escalation (see 1.2.2), including at least 20 conscripts.¹⁸⁹ On 11 October 2023, the Ministry of Defense also published a list containing the names of 192 military personnel who had died in the September 2023 military escalation, including at least 60 conscripts. The youngest casualty was an eighteen-year-old boy who had just completed two months of service.¹⁹⁰ According to one source, the relatively high number of casualties in the September 2023 military escalation was due to the inexperience of the military personnel who had entered the fight. They had been called up for military service just a few months before. This source estimated that 25 to 30 percent of those killed belonged to this category. About 60 people on this list were young soldiers between the ages of eighteen and twenty years, who had only limited experience with complex combat operations in the region.¹⁹¹

3.1.2.9

Refusal of military service

In practice, conscripts refusing to perform their military service on grounds of conscientious objection or for other reasons may face criminal charges. Under Article 321 CC, refusal of military service is understood as the refusal to respond to the next round of call-up or mobilisation call in order to avoid military service without a legal basis for doing so. According to this article, this carries a maximum penalty of two years' incarceration.¹⁹² In wartime, refusal of military service is punishable by three to six years in prison. These provisions also apply to reservists who do not respond to a mobilisation call (see 3.1.2.14).¹⁹³ On 15 January 2024, the cabinet further decided that IDPs who had refused military service were not eligible for the government's monthly financial contribution (see 4.1.1).¹⁹⁴

According to a joint statement by the Public Prosecutor's Office and the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription dated 22 January 2024, twenty criminal cases had been opened in 2023 in connection with Article 321.1 CC (refusal of military service) and Article 321.2 CC (refusal of military service in wartime). Six of these cases had been referred to the court. In the remaining cases, preliminary investigations were ongoing.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, in 2022, the authorities were searching for 31 people due to refusal of military service.¹⁹⁶

Several Jehovah's Witnesses had appealed to conscientious objection on religious grounds. On September 22, 2022, Goranboy District Court sentenced one Jehovah's Witness to nine months in prison for refusal of military service (Article 321.1 CC). On 12 December 2022, a higher court in the city of Ganja (Gəncə) vacated this conviction. Instead, he was given one year of probation, after which he was

¹⁸⁹ On this list, conscripts could be identified by the black-and-white passport photo showing them without a uniform; Turan, *Azerbaijan has updated the list of the killed in the latest escalation of the conflict*, 16 September 2022; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan State Border Service discloses list of Armenian border provocation victims*, 16 September 2022; confidential source, January 2024.

¹⁹⁰ AZERTAC, *Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry discloses list of servicemen martyred during anti-terrorist measures in Karabakh*, 27 September 2023; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

¹⁹¹ Confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁹² Article 321.1 CC.

¹⁹³ Article 321.2 CC; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁹⁴ Confidential source, February 2024; Cabinet Decree of 15 January 2024 (Number 23), <https://e-qanun.az/framework/56109>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

¹⁹⁵ SHXÇDX, *Baş Prokurorluqla Səfərbərlik və Hərbi Xidmətə Çağırış üzrə Dövlət Xidmətinin birgə məlumatı* (Joint information from the Public Prosecutor's Office and the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription), 22 January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

¹⁹⁶ Confidential source, February 2024.

released. On 8 June 2023, the Supreme Court upheld the ruling of 12 December 2022.¹⁹⁷

Furthermore, the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription of Gadabay (Gədəbəy) district detained a Jehovah's Witness on 25 July 2022 after calling him up two days after his eighteenth birthday. The next day, this man was assigned to a military unit in Ganja. Three months later, on 1 November 2022, he was allowed to leave there for medical reasons. On 29 November 2022, he received notice that he had been deemed unfit for medical reasons and that his next medical examination would take place on 14 October 2027.¹⁹⁸

There were also conscripts who evaded compulsory national service for economic or social reasons. One source pointed to three examples in this regard. In one example, on 27 December 2021, a court in the Abşeron district sentenced a man to one year and two months in prison for document forgery and refusal of military service. This man had reportedly presented a false document at the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription in an attempt to obtain a deferral. In July 2022, the Supreme Court upheld the 27 December 2021 ruling. Furthermore, on 23 February 2023, a court in the city of Mingachevir (Mingəçevir) sentenced a 34-year-old man to one year in prison for refusal of military service. He had been granted deferment in 2007 in connection with studies. After discontinuing his studies, he had worked in Russia until 2022. After his return, he was deemed fit for military service. He nevertheless continued to refuse service. Furthermore, on 24 October 2023, the Laçın District Court sentenced a 19-year-old man to six months' suspended imprisonment for refusal of military service (Article 321.1 CC).¹⁹⁹

3.1.2.10 Desertion

Under Article 334.1 CC, desertion is understood as a situation in which a soldier leaves the military unit or duty station on his own initiative, or does not return to the duty station, regardless of the duration of the service. This is punishable by incarceration of three to seven years.²⁰⁰ Desertion with a weapon or in a group is punishable by incarceration of five to eight years.²⁰¹ Furthermore, desertion in wartime or under combat conditions is punishable by incarceration of five to ten years.²⁰²

No information is available indicating the scale at which desertion occurred in the Azerbaijani army.²⁰³ On several occasions, authorities stated that desertion was almost non-existent.²⁰⁴ For example, in his speeches, President Aliyev stated that no one deserted from the Azerbaijani army during the Second Karabakh War of

¹⁹⁷ Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Conscientious objector jailing 'very unexpected decision'*, 29 September 2022; Turan, *U.S. religious body calls on Azerbaijan to release Jehovah's Witness*, 5 October 2022; Jehovah's Witnesses, *Azerbaijan violates ECHR decisions and imprisons Seymur Mammadov for refusing to join military*, 20 October 2022; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Conscientious objector's jail term changed to suspended sentence*, 16 December 2022; Jehovah's Witnesses, *Brothers Royal Karimov and Seymur Mammadov released from detention in Azerbaijan*, 4 January 2023; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Yet another conscientious objector case set for Strasbourg?*, 14 July 2023.

¹⁹⁸ Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Conscientious objector jailing 'very unexpected decision'*, 29 September 2022; Jehovah's Witnesses, *Brothers Royal Karimov and Seymur Mammadov released from detention in Azerbaijan*, 4 January 2023; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Yet another conscientious objector case set for Strasbourg?*, 14 July 2023; European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, *Azerbaijan. Contribution for the 44th session of the Universal Periodic Review (6-17 November 2023)*, 5 April 2023, p. 5.

¹⁹⁹ Confidential source, February 2024.

²⁰⁰ Article 334.1 CC.

²⁰¹ Article 334.2 CC.

²⁰² Article 334.3 CC.

²⁰³ Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁰⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

2020.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, on 21 July 2022, the military prosecutor stated that no cases of desertion had been registered in the Azerbaijani army in the first six months of 2022.²⁰⁶ According to one source, there were also no reports of desertion on the Azerbaijani side during the September 2023 military operation.²⁰⁷ Government information indicates that, in 2022, authorities were searching for 47 people in connection with desertion.²⁰⁸

In April 2023, reports appeared in the Armenian media about two Azerbaijani military personnel who had crossed the border into Armenia from Nakhichevan. According to Armenian authorities, they had deserted.²⁰⁹ However, according to Azerbaijani authorities, they had gotten lost due to the bad weather conditions.²¹⁰ The Armenian prosecution charged one of them with the shooting death of a security guard in the village of Shgharshik in the province of Aragatsotn during an attempt to steal a car. In June 2023, a court in Armenia sentenced him to twenty years in prison.²¹¹ The other member of the military was given 11.5 years in prison for arms smuggling and crossing the border illegally.²¹² On 13 December 2023, Armenia handed them over to Azerbaijani authorities in a prisoner exchange in the district of Gazakh (Qazax).²¹³

No information is available on criminal convictions during the reporting period for desertion from the Azerbaijani army.²¹⁴

3.1.2.11

Composition of the military reserve

The Law on Military Duty and Military Service lists the categories of individuals included in the military reserve.²¹⁵ These categories include men who have served active military service as conscripts.²¹⁶ Once the names of conscripts are removed from the personnel file of a military unit, they become part of the military reserve.²¹⁷ The military reserve further includes men who have been exempted from compulsory military service in peacetime.²¹⁸ Men who have been deemed unfit for

²⁰⁵ AZERTAC, *Azerbaijani president: We have put an end to the mythology that portrayed the Armenian army as an 'invincible army'*, 17 August 2021; President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the opening of a military unit in Hadrut settlement*, 24 December 2021; President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Speech by Ilham Aliyev at the event organized on the occasion of Victory Day in Shusha*, 8 November 2022; AZERTAC, *President: During the war, Azerbaijani army showed its strength*, 10 January 2023; Report, *President Aliyev: No one should forget results of Second Karabakh War*, 18 March 2023; AA, *Efforts to keep Azerbaijan out of strategic projects doomed to failure: President*, 11 May 2023.

²⁰⁶ Trend, *No desertion cases in Azerbaijani army – military prosecutor*, 21 July 2022; AzerNews, *Military prosecutor: No crimes of desertion committed in army in 1H2022*, 23 July 2022.

²⁰⁷ Confidential source, November 2023.

²⁰⁸ Confidential source, February 2024.

²⁰⁹ Azatutyun, *Azeri soldier 'mistreated before fleeing to Armenia'*, 12 April 2023; Azatutyun, *Another Azeri soldier detained in Armenia*, 13 April 2023; Azbarez, *Second Azerbaijani soldier arrested in Armenia*, 13 April 2023; Armenpress, *Second Azeri soldier found and taken into custody by Armenian authorities*, 13 April 2023.

²¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *No:206/23, Press release on infliction of torture against captured Azerbaijani servicemen by Armenia*, 13 April 2023; OC Media, *Second Azerbaijani soldier captured in Armenia*, 14 April 2023.

²¹¹ OC Media, *Azerbaijani soldier who crossed into Armenia charged with murder*, 19 April 2023; Azatutyun, *Azeri soldier sentenced for murder in Armenia*, 21 June 2023.

²¹² Azbarez, *Azerbaijani soldier gets 11.5-year jail term in Armenia*, 8 May 2023; Trend, *Azerbaijani soldier's life imprisonment by Armenia implies Yerevan's next anti-Baku plot*, 6 December 2023.

²¹³ Report, *Serviceman Huseyn Akhundov: 'I am happy to return to Azerbaijan'*, 13 December 2023; APA, *Azerbaijani servicemen Huseyn Akhundov and Agshin Babirov released from captivity*, 13 December 2023.

²¹⁴ Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, March 2024.

²¹⁵ Chapter 8 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²¹⁶ Article 43.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; DCAF, *The rights of conscripts in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus*, 29 June 2021, p. 27; APA, *Azerbaijani president signs order on conscription and release to the reserve*, 16 August 2023; AZERTAC, *Activities on discharge of servicemen who completed military service continue*, 8 October 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Another group of servicemen who completed their active military service is discharged*, 5 January 2024.

²¹⁷ Article 43.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²¹⁸ Article 43.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

military service in peacetime and of limited fitness for wartime are also part of the military reserve. They are re-examined every three years until they reach the age of 35 years.²¹⁹ Furthermore, the military reserve includes individuals who have served in the army as professional military personnel.²²⁰ This could include professional military personnel on fixed-term contracts. An individual who has completed active military service may choose to remain in the army on a three-year contract. He can apply for this until the age of 28 years. The initial rank of such professional military personnel is Private First Class, after which he can advance to Senior Sergeant. He can continue working in the army until he reaches the age of 45 years, after which he can retire.²²¹ This may also include a woman who has completed active military service on a voluntary or contract basis.²²²

The military reserve does not include those exempted from compulsory military service in both peacetime and wartime due to illness.²²³ Furthermore, the military reserve does not include those who have reached the age limit for reservists (see 3.1.2.12).²²⁴ The military reserve also does not include individuals who have been sentenced to long-term or life incarceration for a serious or very serious crime.²²⁵ Furthermore, the military reserve excludes foreigners and stateless persons who have been forcibly expelled from the country during their active military service on the basis of a contract or whose contract has been cancelled.²²⁶ Finally, the military reserve does not include individuals whose Azerbaijani citizenship has been terminated.²²⁷

3.1.2.12 Groups within the military reserve

Reservists are divided into three groups based on their rank²²⁸ and age. The first group, which is the first to be called up in a mobilisation, includes reservists:

- with a petty officer rank or below, up to 35 years of age;
- with a subaltern officer rank, up to 50 years of age;
- with the rank of Major or Lieutenant Colonel, up to 50 years of age;
- with the rank of Colonel, up to 55 years of age;
- with the rank of General, up to 60 years of age.²²⁹

The second group includes reservists with a petty officer rank or below, up to 45 years of age.

²¹⁹ Article 20.3 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²²⁰ Article 44.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; AZERTAC, *Group of servicemen whose service period ended has been discharged*, defense ministry, 3 October 2023.

²²¹ AzerNews, *Age limit for military service in Azerbaijan changes*, 28 November 2023; Fakt Yoxla, *The minimum service period of servicemen in Azerbaijan will be longer than in many countries*, 28 December 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

²²² Article 44.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service; confidential source, January 2024.

²²³ Article 42.0.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²²⁴ Article 42.0.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²²⁵ Article 42.0.3 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²²⁶ Article 42.0.4 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²²⁷ Article 42.0.5 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²²⁸ Pursuant to Article 30.2 of the Military Service Act, the military ranking system in the army is as follows: **Soldiers**: Private (*əsgər*), Private First Class (*baş əsgər*). **Petty Officers**: Junior Sergeant (*kiçik çavuş*), Sergeant (*çavuş*), Senior Sergeant (*baş çavuş*), Junior Warrant Officer (*kiçik gizir*), Warrant Officer (*gizir*), Chief Warrant Officer (*baş gizir*). **Subaltern Officers**: Junior Lieutenant (*kiçik leytenant*), Lieutenant (*leytenant*), Senior Lieutenant (*baş leytenant*), Captain (*kapitan*). **Senior Officers**: Major (*mayor*), Lieutenant Colonel (*polkovnik-leytenant*), Colonel (*polkovnik*). **Chief Officers**: Major-General (*general-mayor*), Lieutenant-General (*general-leytenant*), Colonel-General (*general-polkovnik*), Army General (*ordu generali*).

²²⁹ Article 44.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

The third group, and the last to be mobilised, includes reservists:

- with a petty officer rank or below, up to 50 years of age;
- with a subaltern officer rank, up to 55 years of age;
- with the rank of Major or Lieutenant Colonel, up to 55 years of age;
- with the rank of Colonel, up to 60 years of age;
- with the rank of General, up to 65 years of age.

3.1.2.13 Training of reservists

Reservists with an officer rank may be called up in peacetime to participate in military training, military inspections and special meetings.²³⁰ Reservists in the first group may be called up a maximum of five times for training of up to two months. This should not happen more than once a year.²³¹ Reservists in the second group may be called up a maximum of three times for training of up to two months. This should not happen more than once a year.²³² Reservists in the third group may be called up once for a maximum of one month's training.²³³ According to various sources, most reservists did not receive any call for training.²³⁴ According to reports from the Ministry of Defense, several reservist trainings were held during the reporting period.²³⁵

3.1.2.14 Mobilisation

Civilians who are part of the military reserve and those who do not have a deferral of mobilisation will be called for mobilisation depending on the scaling up of the army in tranches of the consecutive groups listed above (see 3.1.2.12) when a mobilisation is declared.²³⁶ According to one source, no reservists were mobilised after the 2020 Second Karabakh War.²³⁷

3.1.2.15 Partial mobilisation of September 2020

On 28 September 2020, President Aliyev signed Decree number 2280 concerning a partial mobilisation.²³⁸ The State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription called up some of the reservists from the first group for specific tasks because there were sufficient personnel on active military duty and there were sufficient volunteers with recent combat experience.²³⁹ It is not known exactly how many reservists were called up as part of the partial mobilisation of September 2020. According to various sources, only a limited number of reservists were called up. Most of these were reservists who had been discharged three or four years earlier, reservists with

²³⁰ Article 45.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²³¹ Article 45.2.1 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²³² Article 45.2.2 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²³³ Article 45.2.3 of the Law on Military Duty and Military Service.

²³⁴ Turan, *Ruslan Izzetli is being drafted again*, 31 January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²³⁵ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *A military training session will be held in a military unit*, 24 October 2021; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Training session for reservists is being held*, 21 January 2022; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Training session for reservists continues*, 16 July 2022; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Reservists accomplished practical shooting exercises*, 25 April 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Next training session for reservists is being held*, 16 May 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Reservists' training session continues*, 8 June 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Practical shooting exercises were performed during training session*, 14 June 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Reservists' training session ended*, 17 June 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *The next training session is being held with reservists*, 5 September 2023; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Reservists' training session ended*, 8 September 2023; APA, *Reservists' training session commences, Azerbaijan's defense ministry says*, 12 February 2024; Caliber.Az, *Azerbaijani reservists improve combat skills*, 12 February 2024; AzerNews, *Conducted training with reserve group in accordance with 2024 training plan*, 17 February 2024; AzerNews, *MoD: Training session with reservists ends*, 25 February 2024.

²³⁶ Article 14.2 of the Law on Mobilisation Preparation and Mobilisation.

²³⁷ Confidential source, February 2024.

²³⁸ Reuters, *Azerbaijan declares partial military mobilisation – president's decree*, 28 September 2020; AA, *Azerbaijan declares partial military mobilization*, 28 September 2020.

²³⁹ AZERTAC, *Azerbaijan's ministry of defence addresses volunteers who want to join fighting*, 30 September 2020; confidential source, February 2024.

certain specialisations and reserve officers. Because the Second Karabakh War lasted only 44 days, reservists with less recent experience were not called up.²⁴⁰

3.1.2.16 Demobilisation following the Second Karabakh War

On 1 December 2020, President Aliyev signed the Decree calling for the demobilisation of certain categories of reservists who had been mobilised under Decree number 2280 of 28 September 2020. This demobilisation started on 2 December 2020 and included military personnel with three or more children, military personnel who had custody of a person with physical disabilities, military personnel who had been injured and military personnel pursuing higher education.²⁴¹ The demobilisation process of the other soldiers started on 25 December 2020 and was scheduled to continue until 15 April 2021. This demobilisation proceeded incrementally, as a military threat remained.²⁴² According to one source, all reservists had been demobilised within six months.²⁴³ According to another source, there is no information available indicating that, after 15 April 2021, there were any reservists who had not been demobilised. In addition, no information is available indicating that any individuals had been charged or convicted for failing to fulfil their military obligations as members of the military reserve.²⁴⁴

3.1.3 *Members of opposition parties and political activists*

During the reporting period, the Azerbaijani authorities took an increasingly intolerant stance towards the political opposition (see below) and on freedom of expression in general (see 3.2.1).²⁴⁵

3.1.3.1 Law on Political Parties

On 11 January 2023, President Aliyev signed the Law on Political Parties. It replaced a 1992 law of the same name.²⁴⁶ This law further curtailed the pluralism of the political landscape.²⁴⁷ Under this law, a political party was not allowed to function without government registration.²⁴⁸ One of the requirements for registration is that a political party must have at least 5,000 members.²⁴⁹ If the number of members falls below 4,500 after registration, a party can be dissolved following a court order.²⁵⁰ This law affected the number of political parties in the country. Until 2022, the Ministry of Justice had registered 59 political parties.²⁵¹ From 11 January 2023, these political parties were given 180 days to comply with legal requirements.²⁵² On 18 July 2023, the Ministry of Justice reported that 31 parties had decided to self-terminate, and 27 others had submitted the required documents for re-

²⁴⁰ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁴¹ Turan, *Ilham Aliyev announced partial demobilization*, 1 December 2020; Caucasian Knot, *Partial demobilization announced in Azerbaijan*, 2 December 2020.

²⁴² AZERTAC, *Azerbaijan's defense ministry: 'A phase-by-phase discharge of citizens called up for military service on mobilization is expected in nearest time'*, 23 December 2020; Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *The process of a phase-by-phase demobilization of citizens called up for military service on mobilization started*, 25 December 2020; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan announces demobilization of military servicemen*, 25 December 2020; AzerNews, *Defence minister signs order on demobilization in army*, 26 December 2020.

²⁴³ Confidential source, February 2024.

²⁴⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

²⁴⁵ Confidential source, March 2024.

²⁴⁶ Global Voices, *And then there were none – how political parties are disappearing in Azerbaijan*, 18 July 2023; JAMnews, *New law 'on political parties' being prepared in Azerbaijan: Opinions of politicians*, 29 July 2022; JAMnews, *Azerbaijan softens requirements in draft law 'On political parties'*, 22 November 2022.

²⁴⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁴⁸ Article 4.7 of the Law on Political Parties.

²⁴⁹ Article 6.1 of the Law on Political Parties.

²⁵⁰ Article 9.3.4 of the Law on Political Parties.

²⁵¹ Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan's top opposition parties allowed to continue operating*, 15 September 2023; ODIHR, *Azerbaijan, early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 6; Central Election Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Information on political parties included in state registration in the Republic of Azerbaijan*, <https://www.msk.gov.az/en/parties/generalinformation/2022>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

²⁵² Article 30.1 of the Law on Political Parties.

registration.²⁵³ These documents included membership lists containing the names, dates of birth, addresses, telephone numbers and other personal data of party members.²⁵⁴ On 17 July 2023, the Ministry of Justice sent a letter to the parliamentary Republican Alternative Party (*Respublikaçı Alternativ Partiyası*, ReAl) informing it that the membership of a large number of members on the submitted list of members could not be verified and that the threshold of 5,000 members had thus not been met. The two oldest opposition parties — the Popular Front Party and the Müsavat Party — received letters along similar lines on 19 July 2023.²⁵⁵ On 9 September 2023, the Ministry of Justice announced without further explanation that it had registered nineteen parties to date, including ReAl, the Popular Front Party and the Müsavat Party.²⁵⁶ According to various sources, 26 parties had been registered by early 2024.²⁵⁷

3.1.3.2 Popular Front Party

The Popular Front Party is an extra-parliamentary opposition party that is counted amongst the traditional opposition.²⁵⁸ This nationalist party had been led by Ali Karimli since 2001 (Əli Kərimli).²⁵⁹ The party was re-registered in September 2023.²⁶⁰ This party boycotted the 2024 presidential election.²⁶¹

Party members with a more visible profile (e.g. prominent members and activist members) could face problems. For example, according to several sources, prominent members of the Popular Front Party were unable to find jobs. Party activists (e.g. who participated in demonstrations; see 1.2.5) could lose their jobs or rental housing or find it difficult to obtain employment.²⁶² During the reporting period, dozens of reports appeared in the English-language media about activist members of the Popular Front Party facing problems on the part of the authorities, including maltreatment, arrest and administrative or criminal prosecution. For example, they had expressed criticism on social media or participated in peaceful demonstrations. This was sometimes followed by administrative detention for hooliganism (Article 510 CoAO) or failure to obey police orders (Article 535.1 CoAO). In some cases, criminal conviction followed. The charges were sometimes drug-related, for example, under Article 234.4.3 CC (large-scale drug trafficking).²⁶³

²⁵³ The Free Democrats Party (*Azad Demokratlar Partiyası*, ADP) of Sülhəddin Akbar (Sülhəddin Əkbər), did not submit an application for registration in July 2023, because it had only 1,500 members; Novator, *Azad Demokratlar Partiyası tarixə qovuşur? (Is the Free Democrats Party writing history?)*, 10 July 2023; Turan, *27 parties applied to the Ministry of Justice for re-registration*, 18 July 2023; Trend, *Several political parties in Azerbaijan voluntarily terminate their activities*, 18 July 2023.

²⁵⁴ Article 20.10 of the Law on Political Parties.

²⁵⁵ Turan, *The ministry of justice also refused the 'Musavat' party*, 19 July 2023; JAMnews, *Azerbaijani ministry of justice refuses to re-register major opposition parties*, 20 July 2023; Turan, *Even if Musavat is not registered, the party will continue to fight – Arif Hajily*, 22 July 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan's leading opposition parties face threat of dissolution*, 1 August 2023; Turan, *New leadership of 'REAL' Party formed*, 6 November 2023.

²⁵⁶ Turan, *The parties have been re-registered. What's next?*, 11 September 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan's top opposition parties allowed to continue operating*, 15 September 2023; Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Snap elections in Azerbaijan's political quagmire*, 6 February 2024.

²⁵⁷ ODIHR, *Azerbaijan, early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 6; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁵⁸ Altay Goyushov & Ilkin Huseynli, *Halted democracy: Government hijacking of the new opposition in Azerbaijan*. In: Olaf Leiße, *Politik und Gesellschaft im Kaukasus. Eine unruhige Region zwischen Tradition und Transformation*, Springer VS, 2019, pp. 27-51, 28; OC Media, *Opinion: Azerbaijan's traditional opposition needs to appeal to the young*, 5 November 2019.

²⁵⁹ Open Democracy, *100 days in, even Azerbaijan's opposition backs Nagorno-Karabakh blockade*, 30 March 2023; Turan, *Ali Karimli re-elected as chairman of the Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan*, 24 June 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom on the net 2023, Azerbaijan*, 4 October 2023; confidential source, October 2023.

²⁶⁰ Turan, *Ministry of justice registers Party of Popular Front of Azerbaijan*, 9 September 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan's top opposition parties allowed to continue operating*, 15 September 2023.

²⁶¹ Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan's top opposition parties to continue election boycott streak*, 20 December 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijan's main opposition parties boycott the presidential elections*, 20 December 2023.

²⁶² Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source.

²⁶³ Turan, *PPFA activist Anar Huseynov arrested for 30 days*, 21 January 2023; Turan, *PPFA and DME report arrests of their activists after march on Shehid Alley*, 25 January 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist Elnur Hasanov arrested for*

According to one source, the arrests of members of the Popular Front Party often took place only to send a signal to others that they should not demonstrate or express criticism.²⁶⁴ According to another source, posts on social media usually appeared immediately when members of the Popular Front Party were arrested. The main independent Azerbaijani media outlets then took over these reports.²⁶⁵ On 18 March 2024, the Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan (UFPPA) published a list containing the names of 288 political prisoners, including 9 members of the Popular Front Party.²⁶⁶

According to various sources, regular members of the Popular Front Party generally experienced no obstacles and/or serious discrimination in daily life due to their party membership.²⁶⁷

3.1.3.3 Müsavat Party

The Müsavat Party is an extra-parliamentary opposition party that also belongs to the traditional opposition.²⁶⁸ During the reporting period, this nationalist party was led by Arif Hajili (Arif Hacı). He has been the chair of the party since 2014.²⁶⁹ This

30 days, 31 January 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist Orkhan Bakhyshly arrested for 30 days*, 2 February 2023; Turan, *Court of Appeal leaves PPFA activist under administrative arrest*, 4 February 2023; Turan, *Court of Appeal leaves PPFA activist under arrest*, 8 February 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist arrested for 25 days*, 21 February 2023; AIW, *Political activist arrested over social media post*, 21 February 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist Zamin Salayev on hunger strike for 21 days*, 28 February 2023; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 34; Turan, *Two PPFA activists were subjected to administrative arrests*, 31 March 2023; Eurasianet, *The hunger strike: A tested tactic by Azerbaijan's jailed activists*, 6 April 2023; Turan, *Two PPFA activists subjected to administrative punishments*, 10 April 2023; JAMnews, *Imprisoned oppositionist on hunger strike for three months*, 9 May 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist arrested for 30 days*, 29 May 2023; Turan, *Zamin Salayev resumed his hunger strike*, 11 July 2023; Turan, *Court arrests PPFA activist for three months*, 27 July 2023; Turan, *The Supreme Court upheld the verdict of the PPFA activist*, 22 August 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist Farid Aliyev arrested for 30 days*, 18 September 2023; Turan, *The Court of Appeal left the PPFA activist in custody*, 21 September 2023; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani opposition leader's bodyguard jailed on 'politically motivated' charge*, 6 October 2023; Turan, *Bodyguard of the PPFA head was arrested*, 6 October 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist Ramin Akhmedov arrested for 30 days*, 12 October 2023; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani opposition activist sentenced to 20 days in jail on hooliganism charge*, 17 October 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist Orkhan Bakhysh arrested for 20 days*, 17 October 2023; Turan, *The court of appeal left Ali Kerimli's bodyguard under arrest*, 19 October 2023; Turan, *A PPFA activist has been detained*, 20 October 2023; Turan, *Public activist Mohaddin Orujev arrested for 30 days*, 20 October 2023; Turan, *Two activists of Party of Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PPFA) arrested under administrative procedure*, 21 October 2023; Turan, *A PPFA activist said he was beaten by persons in plainclothes*, 24 October 2023; Turan, *'For the usual criticism in social networks, people are either prosecuted...'*, 25 October 2023; Turan, *A PPFA activist who disappeared in August was found in an isolation cell*, 25 October 2023; JAMnews, *Azerbaijani activists claim violence at the hands of law enforcement*, 26 October 2023; Turan, *Activist PPFA suffered a heart attack in jail*, 6 November 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist detained by persons in plain clothes*, 28 November 2023; Turan, *Elnur Hasanov was arrested for 3 months*, 30 November 2023; Turan, *A PPFA activist has declared a hunger strike in prison*, 29 December 2023; Turan, *PPFA activist imprisoned in a punishment cell*, 4 February 2024; Turan, *PPFA activist beaten in police custody*, 6 February 2024; Turan, *PPFA activist is re-imprisoned in a punishment cell*, 22 February 2024; Turan, *The court of appeal has kept the opposition activist in custody*, 19 March 2024; Turan, *The court arrested PPFA activist for 4 months on drug charges*, 21 March 2024; Turan, *Sahib Mammadzade – a victim of a police provocation, according to the relatives of the PPFA activist*, 22 March 2024; Turan, *PPFA activist N.Ahmedov stopped his hunger strike on the 16th day*, 27 March 2024; Turan, *Court in Baku sentences oppositionist to 5 years of imprisonment*, 1 April 2024; Turan, *PPFA condemned the latest 'repressions' in the country*, 3 April 2024; Turan, *76-year-old member of PPFA detained in Dashkesan*, 4 April 2024; Turan, *PPFA activist sentenced to 6 years in prison*, 7 April 2024; Turan, *The PPFA activist was given a tougher punishment regime*, 18 April 2024; IRFS, *As a result of the hunger strike in the pre-trial detention center, the health condition of oppositionist E. Hasanov worsened*, 22 April 2024; Turan, *A PPFA activist has been on a dry hunger strike for the sixth day*, 23 April 2024.

²⁶⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

²⁶⁵ Confidential source, May 2024.

²⁶⁶ UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024.

²⁶⁷ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁶⁸ Altay Goyushov & Ilkin Huseynli, *Halted democracy: Government hijacking of the new opposition in Azerbaijan*, 2019, p. 28; OC Media, *Opinion: Ilham Aliyev's anti-Europe speech foreshadows big changes in Azerbaijan*, 6 December 2019.

²⁶⁹ Turan, *Arif Hajili re-elected head of Musavat*, 13 October 2019; Turan, *'Musavat' is preparing for the congress*, 2 April 2024; confidential source, October 2023.

party was re-registered again in September 2023.²⁷⁰ It did not participate in the 2024 presidential election with its own candidate.²⁷¹

Party members with a more visible profile (e.g. prominent members and activist members) could face problems. For example, according to several sources, prominent members of the Müsavat Party were unable to find jobs. Party activists (e.g. who participated in demonstrations; see 1.2.5) could lose their jobs or rental housing or find it difficult to obtain employment.²⁷² During the reporting period, multiple reports appeared in the English-language media about activist members of the Müsavat Party facing problems on the part of the authorities, including maltreatment, arrest and administrative or criminal prosecution. For example, they had participated in peaceful demonstrations. This was sometimes followed by administrative detention for failure to obey police orders (Article 535.1 CoAO). In one case, criminal conviction followed (see 5.3).²⁷³ According to several sources, the main independent Azerbaijani media outlets usually reported when members of the Müsavat Party encountered problems on the part of the authorities.²⁷⁴ On 18 March 2024, the UFPPA published a list containing the names of 288 political prisoners, including 2 members of the Müsavat Party.²⁷⁵

According to various sources, regular members of the Müsavat Party generally experienced no obstacles and/or serious discrimination in daily life due to their party membership.²⁷⁶

3.1.3.4

Azerbaijani Party of Democracy and Prosperity

During the reporting period, the Azerbaijani Party of Democracy and Prosperity (*Azərbaycan Demokratiya və Rifah Partiyası*, ADR) also faced opposition. Qubad İbadoğlu established the Azerbaijani Democracy and Prosperity Movement in 2014. Thereafter, he tried to transform this movement into the ADR, but the authorities have rejected all registration applications since February 2021.²⁷⁷ İbadoğlu has been

²⁷⁰ Turan, *Ministry of justice re-registers 'Musavat Party'*, 9 September 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan's top opposition parties allowed to continue operating*, 15 September 2023.

²⁷¹ Turan, *'Musavat' refused to participate in the presidential elections*, 15 December 2023; Reuters, *Opposition parties reject Azerbaijan's snap election call as undemocratic*, 18 December 2023.

²⁷² JAMnews, *In Azerbaijan, one can be fired for political views. Stories*, 28 December 2023; Meydan TV, *Political activism costs jobs in Azerbaijan*, 2 January 2024; confidential source.

²⁷³ Turan, *Musavat activist Rovshan Huseynov detained*, 13 October 2021; Caucasian Knot, *'Musavat' Party activist arrested in Azerbaijan*, 14 October 2021; Turan, *Musavat Party activist arrested for 25 days*, 14 October 2021; Turan, *Court of Appeal kept 'Musavat' member in custody*, 29 October 2021; Turan, *Tofiq Yagublu claims police tortured him*, 1 December 2021; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani police severely beat opposition politician, activists*, 2 December 2021; HRW, *Azerbaijan: Opposition leader beaten in custody*, 3 December 2021; Turan, *'Musavat' activist said he was summoned to the police for his publication in Tik-Tok*, 25 January 2022; Caucasian Knot, *'Musavat' Party activist Badalov arrested by political motives, his party colleagues suggest*, 2 June 2022; Caucasian Knot, *'Musavat' Party activist Aziz Mamiyev arrested for 30 days*, 21 July 2022; Turan, *Aziz Mamiyev, 'Musavat' Party activist arrested for 30 days*, 21 July 2022; Turan, *Musavat activist arrested for 30 days*, 27 July 2022; Meydan TV, *Advisor to the head of opposition party Musavat arrested after helping to organize a protest*, 28 July 2022; Turan, *The court of appeal rejected the Musavat member's complaint against administrative arrest*, 6 August 2022; Turan, *Activist deported from Germany sentenced to seven years*, 28 September 2022; Turan, *'Musavat' press secretary detained 'by mistake'*, 11 November 2022; Turan, *'Musavat' party reported short-term detentions of party activists*, 12 November 2022; Turan, *'Musavat' Party member questioned by police for hours*, 18 January 2023; IPD, *Yet, another political activist is deported from Germany and convicted*, 1 March 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Opposition activist swept up in arrests wave ahead of presidential election*, 15 December 2023; HRW, *Azerbaijan: Prominent opposition figure arrested*, 19 December 2023; JAMnews, *Prominent Azerbaijani opposition figure remains under arrest*, 16 April 2024.

²⁷⁴ Confidential source, May 2024; confidential source, May 2024.

²⁷⁵ UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024.

²⁷⁶ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, May 2024; confidential source, May 2024.

²⁷⁷ Caucasian Knot, *A rally demanding registration of 'Azerbaijan Democracy and Welfare' party held in Baku*, 24 August 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani political parties struggle amid new restrictive law*, 27 January 2023; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 33; OCCRP, *Azerbaijan detains well-known opposition leader*, 24 July 2023; Blankspot, *Prominent oppositionist arrested in Azerbaijan*, 30 July 2023; CPJ, *Azerbaijani journalist Rufat Muradli sentenced to 30 days in jail*, 4 December 2023.

working as a researcher in London since September 2021.²⁷⁸ On 27 June 2023, he worked with Jamil Hasanli (Cəmil Həsənli) and Arif Mammadov (Arif Məmmədov) in London to establish the Azerbaijani Youth Educational Foundation.²⁷⁹ In early July 2023, he returned to Baku for a family visit.²⁸⁰ More than a week after his return, on 23 July 2023, authorities arrested him and his wife. He was charged with selling counterfeit money (Article 204.3.1 CC), after a sum of \$40,000 was allegedly found during searches of his office, flat and summer house the day before.²⁸¹ On 25 August 2023, Ibadoğlu's daughter reported that he had also been charged with keeping and distributing religious extremist material (Article 167-3.1 CC). The charges purportedly involved books by Fethullah Gülen (see 3.2.2.5). On 22 April 2024, a court granted the request to place him under house arrest. At the end of the reporting period, no verdict was known in his case.²⁸²

Besides Ibadoğlu, several ADR activists faced problems on the part of the authorities, including maltreatment, arrest and administrative or criminal prosecution. For example, they had expressed criticism on social media. This was sometimes followed by conviction under administrative law for hooliganism (Article 510 CoAO) or failure to obey police orders (Article 535.1 CoAO).²⁸³

3.1.3.5 Relatives of political opponents

According to several sources, the authorities attempted to exert more pressure on political opponents through relatives of political opponents.²⁸⁴ For example, on 31 October 2023, police arrested the son of the Müsavat Party head on charges including leaving the scene of a road accident on 11 October 2023 (Article 264 CC). On December 19, 2023, the Yasamal city district court converted his pre-trial detention to house arrest.²⁸⁵ According to several sources, his arrest was politically motivated.²⁸⁶ In addition, some relatives of political opponents faced a travel ban.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁸ The Guardian, *Health of LSE academic detained in Azerbaijan at risk, say family*, 14 September 2023; Gubad Ibadoghlu, *Curriculum Vitae*, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-relations/assets/documents/people-pages/ibadoghlu-gubad-CV-2021.pdf>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

²⁷⁹ Eurasianet, *Prominent Azerbaijani oppositionist arrested, allegedly tortured*, 25 July 2023; Charity Commission for England and Wales, *Azerbaijani Youth Educational Foundation*, <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5221284/full-print>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

²⁸⁰ Turan, *Deputy Vugar Bayramov about arrest of his brother – Gubad Ibadoglu*, 26 July 2023; IWPR, *Azerbaijan: Opposition figure remains in detention*, 9 August 2023; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁸¹ OC Media, *Azerbaijani opposition party chair detained for 'collusion with a terrorist organisation'*, 25 July 2023; JAMnews, *Contrary to the ECHR ruling, arrested oppositionist in Azerbaijan not provided with serious medical care*, 5 October 2023; Turan, *ADR condemns the extension of Ibadoglu's arrest and demands his release*, 18 November 2023.

²⁸² Meydan TV, *Accusations and political arrest: the case of Gubad Ibadoglu*, 30 August 2023; Turan, *The court did not satisfy the complaint of Gubad Ibadoglu's lawyers*, 14 November 2023; Turan, *Medical examination confirmed that Gubad Ibadoglu has serious health problems*, 24 April 2024.

²⁸³ Turan, *The Azerbaijani Party of Democracy and Prosperity (APDP) condemns pressure on Ziyafat Abbasova*, 8 June 2023; Turan, *The ADWP activist Enver Agamalyzade was detained*, 19 September 2023; Meydan TV, *Political activist and opposition party member Huseyn Malik arrested*, 11 October 2023; OC Media, *Imprisoned Azerbaijani opposition figure Ibadoghlu could 'fall into coma'*, 14 February 2024; Turan, *Activist arrested for voting for Gubad Ibadoglu in presidential election?*, 15 February 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 46.

²⁸⁴ JAMnews, *Protest against the law 'on political parties' held in Baku; dozens arrested*, 30 September 2022; Turan, *'Musavat' Party demands release of oppositionists for attempt to hold a protest against new law on political parties*, 30 September 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 34; Turan, *Human rights defenders condemn pressures on family of political prisoner*, 1 July 2023.

²⁸⁵ Turan, *The son of the head of the Musavat party, Arif Hajili, was detained*, 31 October 2023; Turan, *Musavat Party leader's son released under house arrest in Azerbaijan*, 19 December 2023.

²⁸⁶ JAMnews, *In Azerbaijan, son of opposition politician arrested for road accident*, 4 November 2023; IPD, *The son of the opposition leader is definitely going to be imprisoned*, 7 January 2024; confidential source, November 2023.

²⁸⁷ JAMnews, *Wife of political emigrant arrested in Azerbaijan banned from leaving country*, 26 August 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 15; Turan, *Gubad Ibadoglu's relatives banned to leave the country*, 5 September 2023.

Some relatives lost their jobs. In some cases, political opponents were also pressured with publications of intimate photos and videos of relatives.²⁸⁸ Several sources also cited the example of the wife of a political activist who had to move several times as police placed pressure on landlords.²⁸⁹

3.1.4

LGBTIQ+

Several sources indicated that there had been no substantial improvement in the position of LGBTIQ+ people during the reporting period.²⁹⁰ Azerbaijan remained ranked 49th and last in the 2023 Rainbow Country Ranking by the LGBTIQ+ advocacy organisation ILGA-Europe. This organisation compared the position of LGBTIQ+ in 49 European countries based on 74 criteria. Azerbaijan had satisfactory scores on only two criteria.²⁹¹

Homosexuality was a major taboo for many people in Azerbaijan. Hardly any discussion of LGBTIQ+ issues was possible in the public domain.²⁹² Any discussion or reporting about these issues that did occur was largely in a negative context.²⁹³ Few LGBTIQ+ people were open about their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation.²⁹⁴ In addition, during the reporting period, there were hardly any known Azerbaijanis who were open about their alternative gender identity or their sexual orientation.²⁹⁵

In general, LGBTIQ+ people were not accepted or tolerated within the society.²⁹⁶ They regularly encountered discrimination (see 3.1.4.2). Violence against LGBTIQ+ people also occurred in some cases (see 3.1.4.4). There was a prevailing view in society that an alternative gender identity or sexual orientation was an alien element originating from the West and was contrary to traditional national values centred on the extended family.²⁹⁷ This view emerged several times in statements by politicians and in media reports.²⁹⁸ LGBTIQ+ people who did not hide their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation on social media typically faced abusive and threatening comments on their posts.²⁹⁹ In Azerbaijan, negative stereotypes about LGBTIQ+ people continued to circulate. There was little awareness in society around this issue.³⁰⁰

²⁸⁸ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, December 2023.

²⁸⁹ Turan, *Human rights defenders condemn pressures on family of political prisoner*, 1 July 2023; Turan, *Human rights activists report surveillance and pressure on Azerbaijani political emigrants in Georgia*, 19 October 2023; Blankspot, *The persecution of the exiled*, 5 November 2023; confidential source, November 2023.

²⁹⁰ Confidential source, October 2023; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁹¹ ILGA-Europe, *Rainbow Europe Map and Index 2023*, 11 May 2023; Rainbow Europe, *Country ranking*, <https://rainbow-europe.org/country-ranking>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

²⁹² Confidential source, November 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁹³ IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan*, 2023, p. 7; OC Media, *Azerbaijani authorities remain silent over murder of trans woman*, 22 March 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

²⁹⁴ JAMnews, *Queer media in Azerbaijan*, 27 October 2022.

²⁹⁵ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, May 2024; confidential source, May 2024.

²⁹⁶ ILGA-Europe, *Annual review of the human rights situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex people in Azerbaijan covering the period of January to December 2023*, 29 February 2024, p. 37; confidential source, December 2023.

²⁹⁷ Minority Azerbaijan, *Haji Tayyar Huseynli supported the murders of LGBTI+s*, 27 January 2022; OC Media, *The rise of homophobic hate speech in Azerbaijan*, 28 January 2022; JAMnews, *Inaccurate mental disorder diagnoses and other problems LGBTI+ faces in Azerbaijan*, 14 June 2022; Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission to the 44th session of the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review Working Group*, 5 April 2023, p. 3; Chaikhana, *Russia's homophobic law inspires Azerbaijani political elites*, 17 May 2023; Minority Azerbaijan, *REAL TV's attack on the LGBTQ+ flag*, 19 May 2023; Eurasianet, *Perspectives: Government campaign targets Azerbaijan's anti-war activists*, 13 September 2023.

²⁹⁸ Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission*, 5 April 2023, p. 4; ILGA-Europe, *Annual review*, 29 February 2024, p. 36.

²⁹⁹ Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission*, 5 April 2023, p. 7; confidential source, November 2023.

³⁰⁰ ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan (sixth monitoring cycle). Adopted on 29 March 2023*, 21 June 2023, p. 12; UNGA, *Azerbaijan (A/HRC/WG.6/44/AZE/2)*, 31 August 2023, p. 9.

3.1.4.1

LGBTIQ+ people in Baku and elsewhere in Azerbaijan

According to various sources, the difference between the situation for LGBTIQ+ people in Baku and in rural areas was significant. Especially outside Baku, individuals who were openly LGBTIQ+ were not accepted by their families and their immediate surroundings. In rural areas, there was little understanding of LGBTIQ+ issues, and the topic remained a major taboo.³⁰¹ Therefore, according to one source, LGBTIQ+ people in rural areas generally did not openly express their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation.³⁰² According to another source, LGBTIQ+ people usually went to Baku because the situation was less hostile for them there.³⁰³ In Baku, they could live somewhat more in anonymity. It was easier to connect with other LGBTIQ+ people in Baku. They also had more opportunities to find jobs or housing there.³⁰⁴ According to one source, the pressure from family and society also led increasing numbers of LGBTIQ+ people to look for opportunities to leave the country.³⁰⁵

3.1.4.2

Discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people

In their daily lives, LGBTIQ+ people regularly faced exclusion and discrimination when they openly expressed their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation. Discrimination occurred in various areas, including education, military service, the housing market, the labour market and healthcare.³⁰⁶ Many LGBTIQ+ people struggled to find or retain jobs and housing.³⁰⁷ It was common for employers to dismiss LGBTIQ+ people upon learning about their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation. In many cases, this led LGBTIQ+ people to hide this information from their employers. In addition, employers sometimes paid LGBTIQ+ people less and landlords charged particularly high rent to LGBTIQ+ people.³⁰⁸

Trans people in particular encountered considerable discrimination and hardship in their daily lives.³⁰⁹ They often struggled to find work or to find and maintain housing.³¹⁰ In some cases, medical staff refused to provide assistance to trans people. For example, they would be sent from hospital to hospital until they could

³⁰¹ JAMnews, *Azerbaijan's LGBTIQI people: who they are and how they live*, 22 October 2021; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 13; Meduza, *Coming out but still underground. A photographer captures the lives of LGBTIQ+ people in Azerbaijan*, 15 March 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁰² Confidential source, February 2024.

³⁰³ Confidential source, February 2024.

³⁰⁴ JAMnews, *How homosexuals live in the most homophobic country in Europe*, 8 September 2022; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 13; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

³⁰⁵ Confidential source, February 2024.

³⁰⁶ Chaikhana, *Unsafe in the classroom*, 9 December 2021; JAMnews, *Inaccurate mental disorder diagnoses and other problems LGBTI+ faces in Azerbaijan*, 14 June 2022; Minority Azerbaijan, *Problem of unemployment due to gender identity*, 26 August 2022; Minority Azerbaijan, *Pride week at school number 225 has concluded*, 17 November 2023; OC Media, *Student boycotts school in Baku over alleged homophobic abuse*, 25 November 2021; JAMnews, *How homosexuals live in the most homophobic country in Europe*, 8 September 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 43; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 13; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, one young queer activist is defying boundaries*, 26 September 2023; confidential source, November 2023.

³⁰⁷ JAMnews, *How homosexuals live in the most homophobic country in Europe*, 8 September 2022; ILGA-Europe, *Annual review of the human rights situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex people in Azerbaijan covering the period of January to December 2022*, 20 February 2023; confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁰⁸ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 44; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁰⁹ Minority Azerbaijan, *Trans women were detained by the police*, 25 August 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 43; Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission*, 5 April 2023, pp. 3 and 12; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, public transportation does not welcome trans passengers*, 30 October 2023; Meduza, *Coming out but still underground*, 15 March 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³¹⁰ Meydan TV, *'Not everyone is cut out to fight'*, 1 November 2021; ILGA-Europe, *Annual review*, 20 February 2023, p. 35; ILGA-Europe, *Annual review*, 29 February 2024, p. 37.

find a doctor or nurse who was willing to help them.³¹¹ In late 2021, the story of a trans woman from the city of Sumqayıt working as a hairstylist in a beauty salon came to public attention. She stated that, amongst other things, she had been bullied at school and that, in the ninth grade, her school had urged her to go to another school. She also stated that the police had forced her to close her own beauty salon in Sumqayıt.³¹²

According to one source, many transgender people were victims of sexual abuse and extortion due to their vulnerable position.³¹³ They were also quite likely to end up in prostitution.³¹⁴ In society, trans women were often associated with prostitution.³¹⁵ In prisons, some trans women also faced sexual violence. Because their identity documents usually stated that they were male, trans women were sent to prisons for men.³¹⁶

3.1.4.3

LGBTIQ+ people and medical examinations for military service

LGBTIQ+ people sometimes encountered problems during the medical examination for military service if they revealed their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation. When LGBTIQ+ people revealed this during the examinations, the State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription usually forwarded them to a psychiatric clinic, where they had to stay for several days. They were then diagnosed with personality disorders or mental disorders.³¹⁷ The state service also noted these grounds for rejection in the military booklet. These grounds for rejection made a person ineligible for certain professions, including the teaching profession. This could also cause problems in the labour market, as employers usually ask to see the military booklets of candidates when they apply for jobs.³¹⁸ Another consequence of this could be that the relatives of individuals who had been rejected on these grounds could request a court to have their property confiscated.³¹⁹ For this reason, most LGBTIQ+ people kept their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation hidden at the time of the examination. Only trans women were not able to keep this hidden. They were also called up, as they were registered as men.³²⁰

³¹¹ JAMnews, *How homosexuals live in the most homophobic country in Europe*, 8 September 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

³¹² Meydan TV, *'Not everyone is cut out to fight'*, 1 November 2021; JAMnews, *How homosexuals live in the most homophobic country in Europe*, 8 September 2022.

³¹³ Confidential source, December 2023.

³¹⁴ JAMnews, *'For me, Azerbaijan is about injuries' – why LGBTIQ+ people leave the country*, 20 September 2021; Meydan TV, *'Not everyone is cut out to fight'*, 1 November 2021; OC Media, *Azerbaijan's queer sex workers face double isolation*, 5 August 2022; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 14; Meduza, *Coming out but still underground*, 15 March 2024; Minority Azerbaijan, *Fear and anger: will the trans community of Azerbaijan get justice?*, 26 March 2024; confidential source, December 2023.

³¹⁵ Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Understanding intersectionality through LGBTQIA+/Queer narratives in Azerbaijan*, 18 July 2022; JAMnews, *How homosexuals live in the most homophobic country in Europe*, 8 September 2022.

³¹⁶ JAMnews, *'I was sold for 500 manats' – the fate of transgender people in Azerbaijani prisons*, 12 August 2022; OC Media, *A prison within a prison: trans women behind bars in Azerbaijan*, 1 December 2022; confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, April 2024.

³¹⁷ Global Voices, *'Unfit for military service': How Azerbaijan stigmatizes LGBTQ+ military personnel*, 26 November 2021; JAMnews, *Inaccurate mental disorder diagnoses and other problems LGBTI+ faces in Azerbaijan*, 14 June 2022; Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *From raids to wars: Queer bodies for the homeland, Azerbaijan*, 28 March 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 60.

³¹⁸ Global Voices, *'Unfit for military service': How Azerbaijan stigmatizes LGBTQ+ military personnel*, 26 November 2021; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 14; JAMnews, *'If your protesting hand gets tired, I'll be there to take it'*, 13 July 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³¹⁹ Global Voices, *'Unfit for military service': How Azerbaijan stigmatizes LGBTQ+ military personnel*, 26 November 2021; JAMnews, *Inaccurate mental disorder diagnoses and other problems LGBTI+ faces in Azerbaijan*, 14 June 2022.

³²⁰ Confidential source, February 2024.

3.1.4.4 Violence against LGBTIQ+ people

In Baku and elsewhere in the country, LGBTIQ+ people sometimes faced threats and physical violence.³²¹ For example, on 18 September 2022, the online magazine *Minority Azerbaijan* reported on a trans woman who had been stabbed to death in a park in Baku the night before.³²² On 9 July 2023, *Minority Azerbaijan* reported on the discovery of the body of a trans woman in the village of Khojasan (Xocəsən) near Baku on 5 July 2023.³²³

One famous LGBTIQ+ activist was Avaz Shikhmammadov (Əvəz Şixməmmədov), also known as Avaz Hafizli (Əvəz Hafizli). He also worked as a journalist for the news website *Kanal 13* (see 3.2.1.5). On September 8, 2021 Shikhmammadov chained himself to the fences of the Public Prosecutor's Office. He did this to protest the failure to take action against a well-known influencer who, amongst other things, had called on social media to rid society of transgender people. A few months later, on 22 February 2022, Shikhmammadov was brutally murdered by his cousin in his home in Baku. His cousin stated in court that he had killed him because of his sexual orientation. On 29 July 2022, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced this cousin to nine years and six months in prison on grounds of Article 120.1 CC (premeditated murder). According to LGBTIQ+ activists, the court had not included some aggravating circumstances in this judgment.³²⁴

3.1.4.5 Protection of LGBTIQ+ people by the authorities

LGBTIQ+ people who experienced violence as a result of their alternative gender identity or sexual orientation typically received little understanding or protection from the authorities.³²⁵ In many cases, their reports remained unaddressed. There were also instances in which the police refused to act against the perpetrators or refused to take a report or investigate further.³²⁶ According to various sources, the police did not usually take reports from LGBTIQ+ people seriously except in cases

³²¹ OC Media, *Instagram star in Azerbaijan repeats call to 'remove' trans people from country*, 3 September 2021; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan silence looms as yet another member of LGBTIQ+ community is fatally targeted*, 8 September 2021; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Trans woman was attacked in Baku*, 19 November 2021; OC Media, *Man who threatened to behead queer people arrested in Azerbaijan*, 6 July 2022; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *19-year-old bisexual woman receives death threats*, 13 August 2022; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Trans woman was sexually harassed in Baku*, 14 August 2022; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *LGBTIQ+ activist and a trans woman were attacked in Baku*, 7 September 2022; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Gay man was attacked in Baku*, 9 July 2023; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Queer student was beaten at school*, 28 September 2023; ILGA-Europe, *Annual review*, 29 February 2024, p. 36.

³²² *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Trans woman was killed in Baku*, 18 September 2022.

³²³ *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Trans woman tortured to death in Baku*, 9 July 2023.

³²⁴ Under Article 120.1 CC, premeditated murder may be punishable by a minimum of nine and a maximum of 14 years' incarceration; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Blogger Huseynova threatened trans folks with death*, 26 August 2021; OC Media, *Journalist chains himself to prosecutor's gate in Azerbaijan*, 9 September 2021; OC Media, *Prominent queer Azerbaijani journalist brutally murdered*, 23 February 2022; Pink News, *Tireless Azerbaijani LGBTIQ+ journalist 'slaughtered, beheaded and has penis cut off' by own cousin*, 24 February 2022; PinkNews, *LGBTIQ+ activists 'blocked' from public trial of man who beheaded and castrated gay journalist*, 26 July 2022; OC Media, *Murderer of queer Azerbaijani journalist sentenced to 9 years*, 30 July 2022; PinkNews, *Man who 'beheaded' Azerbaijani LGBTIQ+ journalist sentenced to nearly a decade in jail*, 30 July 2022; ILGA-Europe, *The timeline leading from anti-LGBTI Instagram posts to the 'honour killing' of an LGBTI activist in Azerbaijan*, 5 August 2022; Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission*, 5 April 2023, p. 8.

³²⁵ OC Media, *Azerbaijan's queer sex workers face double isolation*, 5 August 2022; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *17-year-old teenager is subjected to violence in Salyan*, 23 August 2022; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Trans woman was subjected to violence in Sumgait*, 2 September 2022; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *LGBTIQ+ activist and a trans woman were attacked in Baku*, 7 September 2022; Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission*, 5 April 2023, p. 11; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, violence against LGBTIQ+ people continues unabated*, 27 May 2023; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 21; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Trans man subjected to police transphobia*, 3 July 2023; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Police is investigating Friends Café's phobic behavior*, 9 July 2023; confidential source, November 2022; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³²⁶ JAMnews, *16-year-old schoolboy subject to bullying in Azerbaijan cannot find protection*, 22 December 2021; JAMnews, *How homosexuals live in the most homophobic country in Europe*, 8 September 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, pp. 43-44; Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission*, 5 April 2023, p. 11; *Minority Azerbaijan*, *Police is investigating Friends Café's phobic behavior*, 9 July 2023; ILGA-Europe, *Annual review*, 29 February 2024, p. 36; confidential source, December 2023.

surrounded by considerable publicity or when their superiors were called in or when assistance was provided by lawyers or social workers.³²⁷ According to one source, most LGBTIQ+ people never turned to the police, as the police usually informed their relatives.³²⁸ In some cases, the police also harassed them and tried to extort them.³²⁹

3.1.5

Women

According to the Constitution, men and women are equal.³³⁰ In practice, women have not enjoyed the same rights as men.³³¹ Numerous traditional patterns and social norms have contributed to skewed male-female relations in society, as well as to stereotypes of women as mothers and caregivers within families. In this male-dominated society, women have tended to play a subordinate role, and women's rights have therefore remained an underexposed topic.³³² According to various sources, there has been a revival of patriarchal values in society following the Second Karabakh War of 2020.³³³ One consequence of this is that gender-selective abortion (see 3.1.5.1) and domestic violence (see 3.1.5.2) have continued to be common. Another consequence has been low participation of women in the labour market.³³⁴ Women have also faced work restrictions (e.g. with regard to working at night or underground). In 1999, the cabinet approved a list of professions from which women were excluded. In October 2022, the parliament shortened this list from 674 to 204 professions.³³⁵ Relatively large numbers of women were employed in the health, education and service sectors, but usually not in management positions.³³⁶ There was also a relatively high number of women working in low-paid jobs without employment contracts in the informal sector.³³⁷ A significant gender pay gap existed.³³⁸

In addition to being under-represented amongst the highest-level business leaders, women were under-represented in politics and government³³⁹ For example, of the 116 members of parliament, only 21 (18%) were women, including the speaker of

³²⁷ Global Voices, *The unprotected: Police offer scant safety for Azerbaijan's LGBTQ+ community*, 17 January 2023; Minority Azerbaijan, *Trans man subjected to police transphobia*, 3 July 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

³²⁸ Confidential source, February 2024.

³²⁹ ILGA-Europe, *Annual review*, 29 February 2024, p. 36; confidential source, February 2024.

³³⁰ Article 25(2) of the Constitution.

³³¹ Confidential source, December 2023.

³³² CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 6; Global Voices, *What is wrong with Azerbaijan's mentality towards its women*, 23 March 2023; confidential source, November 2022.

³³³ Confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³³⁴ Confidential source, December 2023.

³³⁵ CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 11; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan reduces list of prohibited professions for women*, 15 October 2022; The World Bank, *Lifting barriers to women employment will benefit everyone in Azerbaijan*, 8 March 2023; UN Azerbaijan, *Annual results report 2022*, 16 May 2023, p. 3.

³³⁶ IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan*, 2023, p. 8; Turan, *State Statistics Committee reports on 'active participation of women' in economic and political life of country*, 6 March 2024; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³³⁷ CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 11; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³³⁸ CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 11; The World Bank, *Lifting barriers to women employment will benefit everyone in Azerbaijan*, 8 March 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³³⁹ The World Bank, *Azerbaijan. Country economic memorandum*, 19 October 2022, p. 164; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 40; The Guardian, *Azerbaijan appoints no women to 28-member Cop29 climate committee*, 15 January 2024; The Guardian, *Women added to Cop29 climate summit committee after backlash*, 19 January 2024; ODIHR, *Azerbaijan, early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 3; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan adds more women to COP29 organising committee*, 22 February 2024; confidential source, January 2024.

parliament.³⁴⁰ There were no women ministers.³⁴¹ Furthermore, women were under-represented in the judiciary, although the number of women judges did increase during the reporting period.³⁴²

3.1.5.1 Gender-selective abortion

Gender-selective abortion occurred, with a preference for boys.³⁴³ This preference was also reflected in some names that have been given to girls in the recent past, including *Bastı* (stop) and *Yetar* (enough).³⁴⁴ According to the State Statistics Committee, in 2021, the sex ratio at birth was 116 boys to 100 girls. As of 2022, the ratio had fallen to 112 to 100.³⁴⁵ According to one source, this downward trend had been influenced by urbanisation.³⁴⁶

3.1.5.2 Domestic violence

Domestic violence remained a common phenomenon.³⁴⁷ Women and girls were generally reluctant to report or seek help because they did not trust the authorities.³⁴⁸ They also feared social stigma if they were to report.³⁴⁹ In practice, the police and local executive agencies handling complaints of domestic violence tended to reconcile victims of domestic violence with perpetrators.³⁵⁰ Generally, they regarded domestic violence against women and girls as a private matter. For this reason, the police and the judiciary did not always take victims of domestic violence seriously.³⁵¹ According to several sources, the police often refused to take reports of domestic violence. Instead, the police would contact the families of domestic violence victims and sent them back home without recording their reports.³⁵² According to various sources, situations were changing in this regard, especially in Baku.³⁵³

³⁴⁰ The World Bank, *Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) - Azerbaijan, European Union*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=AZ-EU>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

³⁴¹ ODIHR, *Azerbaijan, early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 3; JAMnews, *Ilham Aliyev has approved a new composition for Azerbaijan's cabinet of ministers*, 16 February 2024.

³⁴² CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 9; CEPEJ, *Part 2 (A) – Beneficiary profile – Azerbaijan*, 18 July 2023, pp. 7 and 12; UNGA, *Azerbaijan (A/HRC/WG.6/44/AZE/2)*, 31 August 2023, p. 7; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁴³ CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 13; Meydan TV, *Selective abortions: a 'war' against girls*, 30 September 2022; UNFPA, *From reflection to action: how a father from Azerbaijan became an agent of change in combating gender biased sex selection*, 6 April 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Website eyes reasons for selective abortions in Azerbaijan*, 22 November 2023; UNFPA, *Every girl counts. Son preference and daughter aversion*, November 2023, p. 2; Turan, *How to eliminate selective abortions...*, 21 March 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁴⁴ SIA, *Selective abortions should be illegal*, 1 August 2022; confidential source, January 2024.

³⁴⁵ UNFPA, *Every girl counts. Son preference and daughter aversion*, November 2023, p. 8.

³⁴⁶ Confidential source, February 2024.

³⁴⁷ VOA, *Azerbaijani activists raise alarm about domestic violence*, 11 December 2021; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, domestic violence activists are becoming the targets*, 21 April 2022; CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 7; UNGA, *Azerbaijan (A/HRC/WG.6/44/AZE/2)*, 31 August 2023, p. 7; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁴⁸ Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁴⁹ Confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁵⁰ Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, domestic violence activists are becoming the targets*, 21 April 2022; Nisa Ismayilzade, *The politicization of domestic violence in Azerbaijan*, 26 April 2022.

³⁵¹ France 24, *Azerbaijan activists sound alarm over wave of killings of women*, 10 November 2021; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, domestic violence activists are becoming the targets*, 21 April 2022; Mikroskop Media, *Baku police accused of negligence in yet another domestic violence case*, 9 June 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 53; confidential source, November 2022; confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

³⁵² OC Media, *Police officer allegedly kills wife at police station in Baku*, 1 October 2021; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, domestic violence activists are becoming the targets*, 21 April 2022; Nisa Ismayilzade, *The politicization of domestic violence in Azerbaijan*, 26 April 2022; confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

³⁵³ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

In addition to the general emergency number 102, a free direct telephone helpline was also available to victims of domestic violence (telephone number 860). Alternatively, they could also call the general number of the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs (*Ailə, Qadın və Uşaq Problemləri üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi*) and a call centre of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population.³⁵⁴

The police had the option of issuing a warning to the offender not to use violence in the future. There was also the possibility of applying for a short-term protection order of up to 30 days and then, possibly, a long-term protection order of 30 to 180 days. A short-term protection order prohibited an offender from searching for the victim. A court issued a long-term protection order that could also include rules on access to the children and the use of the shared home.³⁵⁵ In practice, it was sometimes difficult to obtain a protection order. According to various sources, this was related to a lack of capacity and competences among local executive authorities.³⁵⁶ During the reporting period, however, the number of protection orders did increase.³⁵⁷

There were three institutions where victims of domestic violence could receive temporary shelter.³⁵⁸ One institution was operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population. This was the Shelter and Social Rehabilitation Institution for vulnerable groups. This one was located in the village of Zabrat near Baku. This institution provided temporary accommodation for homeless people older than eighteen years of age, victims of domestic violence, people with visual impairments and neglected, abandoned or socially disadvantaged minors.³⁵⁹ According to various sources, between thirty and fifty places were available here for victims of domestic violence.³⁶⁰ Another institution was the women's shelter known as Clean World (*Təmiz Dünya*) in the Binagadi (Binəqədi) district of Baku. This shelter was managed by an NGO.³⁶¹ According to various sources, this shelter officially had about fifty spaces.³⁶² The third and smallest institution was located in the city of Ganja and was managed by the NGO Tamas public regional development association (*'Təmas' regional inkişaf ictimai birliyi*).³⁶³ According to one source, it accommodated up to thirty people.³⁶⁴ According to

³⁵⁴ CRC, *Replies of Azerbaijan to the list of issues in relation to its combined fifth and sixth reports (CRC/C/AZE/RQ/5-6)*, 26 May 2022, p. 9; UNFPA, *Act to stop gender-based violence (GBV)*, <https://azerbaijan.unfpa.org/en/stop-gbv>, consulted on 15 May 2024; confidential source, January 2024.

³⁵⁵ UNFPA, *Act to stop gender-based violence (GBV)*; State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs, *For citizens – Frequently asked questions*, <http://family.gov.az/en/faqs?page=2>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

³⁵⁶ VOA, *Azerbaijani activists raise alarm about domestic violence*, 11 December 2021; Nisa Ismayilzadə, *The politicization of domestic violence in Azerbaijan*, 26 April 2022; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁵⁷ Turan, *There are shortcomings in Azerbaijan with the application of protective orders against domestic violence*, 23 February 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

³⁵⁸ Eurasianet, *Living with fear: Azerbaijan's domestic abuse victims have nowhere to flee*, 4 October 2019; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁵⁹ DOST, *Shelter and social rehabilitation institution for vulnerable groups*, <https://dost.gov.az/en/services/social-services/?kt=36>, consulted on 15 May 2024; DOST, *Social service institutions*, <https://dost.gov.az/en/page/sosial-xidmet-muessiseleri>, consulted on 15 May 2024; confidential source, January 2024.

³⁶⁰ The World Bank, *Social services for adults and children*, 28 June 2023, p. 32; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁶¹ IOM, *'I am a fighter and I never stop supporting my kids'*, 25 February 2022; The Guardian, *'They gave me a chance': refuge where abused Azerbaijani women find hope*, 5 April 2022; Turan, *Israeli ambassador's wife organised help for residents of 'Clean World' orphanage*, 4 April 2024.

³⁶² Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁶³ UNFPA, *Act to stop gender-based violence (GBV)*; IOM Azerbaijan, *IOM Azerbaijan conducts monitoring visit to a shelter for the victims of trafficking and domestic violence, individuals vulnerable to trafficking*, 27 April 2022; IOM Azerbaijan, *From despair to hope for the future: A victim of domestic violence turns a successful women entrepreneur*, 31 July 2023.

³⁶⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

women's rights activists, there was often no room in these three institutions.³⁶⁵ According to one source, these institutions lacked sufficient financial (and other) resources.³⁶⁶ Several sources indicated that LGBTIQ+ people who were victims of domestic violence were generally denied access to these institutions.³⁶⁷

3.1.6 *Minors and unaccompanied minors*

3.1.6.1 Legal age of majority

The legal age of majority applies from the age of eighteen years.³⁶⁸ Minors between the ages of seven and eighteen years have limited legal competency.³⁶⁹ Children are allowed to work from the age of fifteen years.³⁷⁰ A child is criminally culpable from the age of fourteen years. A person can be tried as an adult from the age of eighteen years.³⁷¹ Legally, a person may marry from the age of eighteen years. An exception is possible at the age of seventeen years. This requires extenuating circumstances and the consent of the parents and local executive authorities. Pregnancy is one example of an extenuating circumstance.³⁷²

3.1.6.2 Compulsory education

Compulsory education does not apply until a certain age, but up to and including the ninth grade of general secondary education.³⁷³ Compulsory primary education runs from Grade 1 to Grade 4. Children in Grade 1 are generally six or seven years of age.³⁷⁴ Compulsory general secondary education runs from Grade 5 to Grade 9.³⁷⁵ The ninth grade concludes with an examination.³⁷⁶ At the end of the ninth grade, students receive a certificate.³⁷⁷ Grades 10 and 11 of secondary school are optional. Children in Grade 11 are generally seventeen or eighteen years of age.³⁷⁸

It was common for children not to attend school for various reasons. One possible reason could be that, in rural areas, the nearest school is too far away. Another reason could be that the parents did not have the financial means to buy school supplies or meet the costs of transport.³⁷⁹ A small number of children did not attend school because they were not registered with the local executive authorities.³⁸⁰

³⁶⁵ VOA, *Azerbaijani activists raise alarm about domestic violence*, 11 December 2021; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, domestic violence activists are becoming the targets*, 21 April 2022.

³⁶⁶ Confidential source, February 2024.

³⁶⁷ Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁶⁸ Article 1 of the Law on the Rights of the Child; Article 28.2 CLC; Article 49.1 of the Family Law Code; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁶⁹ Article 28.3 CLC.

³⁷⁰ USDOL, *2022 findings on the worst forms of child labor*, 26 September 2023, p. 153; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁷¹ Council of Europe, *SPACE I 2022. Annual penal statistics*, 27 October 2023, p. 40; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁷² Article 10.1 of the Family Law Code; CRC, *Replies of Azerbaijan to the list of issues in relation to its combined fifth and sixth reports (CRC/C/AZE/RQ/5-6)*, 26 May 2022, p. 25; DSK, *Children in Azerbaijan, 2023: Statistical yearbook*, 28 November 2023, p. 29; JAMnews, *Early marriage in Azerbaijan – is the problem getting worse?*, 16 November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁷³ Zinyat Amirova, Azerbaijan. In: K.A. Reynolds, E. Wry, I.V.S. Mullis, & M. von Davier, *PIRLS 2021 Encyclopedia: Education policy and curriculum in reading*, 10 March 2022; IOM, *Azerbaijan. Country fact sheet 2022*, December 2022, p. 10; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁷⁴ Article 19.11 of the Law on Education.

³⁷⁵ Article 19.14 of the Law on Education.

³⁷⁶ Article 19.16 of the Law on Education; AzerNews, *Over 55 thousand ninth-grade students take graduation exam today*, 7 April 2024.

³⁷⁷ Report, *Azerbaijani students will be given education certificate under new rules*, 7 October 2016; confidential source, November 2023.

³⁷⁸ Zinyat Amirova, Azerbaijan, 10 March 2022; IPHR & BHRC, *Social and economic rights in Azerbaijan. The right to adequate standard of living. The right to the highest attainable standard of health. The right to work. The right to education*, 5 July 2022, p. 62; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁷⁹ Confidential source, November 2023.

³⁸⁰ USDOL, *2022 findings on the worst forms of child labor*, 26 September 2023, p. 153; confidential source, February 2024.

Some children did not attend school because they had mental or physical disabilities.³⁸¹ There were also children of Roma origin who did not attend school (at least not on a regular basis).³⁸² According to various sources, it was common for some girls to drop out of school before completing general secondary education due to marriage (for religious reasons) and/or pregnancy. They remained enrolled in school, but they did not actually attend school, or they came only when there were tests. Parents sometimes paid money to headmasters and teachers to register attendance.³⁸³

According to one source, local departments of the Ministry of Education were responsible for enforcing compulsory education. In the autonomous republic of Nakhichevan, this was the responsibility of a special committee. For example, these agencies could arrange financial support so that the children could still attend school. Children could also be sent to boarding schools. The intervention and support provided depended on the case. This could involve a variety of individuals and agencies (e.g. social workers, the Ombudsperson or the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs).³⁸⁴ According to another source, it was initially teachers and headmasters who approached parents when a child was staying away from school. The school also passed on information about this to the police. A youth inspector was employed within the police force in each district.³⁸⁵ According to various sources, in practice, there was hardly any enforcement when parents did not allow their children attend school.³⁸⁶

3.1.6.3 Identity cards for minors

An independent identity card of a citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan may be issued to a minor from birth.³⁸⁷ According to the law, any citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan who has reached the age of fifteen years or a person who has obtained citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan must obtain an identity card within one month. A citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan who has not yet reached the age of fifteen years is entitled to an identity card based on an application by one of the parents, the adoptive parent of a citizen, a legal representative of a citizen or a person appointed according to a notarised power of attorney of a legal representative.³⁸⁸ Children between fifteen and eighteen years of age may apply for identity cards on their own.³⁸⁹ In the case of children younger than five years, the identity card is valid until the child is five years of age. For children from five years of age, the document is valid until the child reaches fifteen years of age. For individuals fifteen years of age and older, it is valid for ten years. For individuals 55 years of age or older, it is valid indefinitely.³⁹⁰

³⁸¹ USDOL, *2022 findings on the worst forms of child labor*, 26 September 2023, p. 153; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 61; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁸² USDOL, *2022 findings on the worst forms of child labor*, 26 September 2022, p. 153; Meydan TV, *Traditions or stereotypes?*, 1 March 2023; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 48; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁸³ CEDAW, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Azerbaijan (CEDAW/C/AZE/CO/6)*, 12 July 2022, p. 10; confidential source, December 2023.

³⁸⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

³⁸⁵ Confidential source, February 2024.

³⁸⁶ Meydan TV, *Traditions or stereotypes?*, 1 March 2023; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, December 2023.

³⁸⁷ Azerbaijan 24, *Requirements for ID cards to be issued to citizens under 15 determined*, 3 December 2021; APA, *Azerbaijani citizens under age of 15 to be issued ID cards*, 20 December 2021.

³⁸⁸ Article 1 of the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on identification document of citizen of the Azerbaijan Republic.

³⁸⁹ ASAN service, *Issuance and renewal of identity cards*, <https://asan.gov.az/en/service/asan-xidmetler/seksiyyet-vesiqelerinin-verilmesi-ve-deyisdirilmesi>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

³⁹⁰ Article 4 of the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on identification document of citizen of the Azerbaijan Republic.

3.1.6.4 Passports for minors

An independent passport may be issued to a minor from birth. Passports issued to children younger than one year of age are valid for one year. For children between one and three years of age, the validity period is three years. For children between three and eighteen years of age, it is five years. Passports for individuals older than eighteen years of age are valid for ten years.³⁹¹ Children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen years of age may apply for passports on their own. In such cases, written consent from one of the parents (biological or adoptive) or a legal representative must be submitted. This consent must be confirmed by a notary.³⁹² A notary is also available in an ASAN service centre (*Asan xidmət*).³⁹³ The parents (biological or adoptive) or a legal representative must also be present upon application for a passport.³⁹⁴

3.1.6.5 Permission to travel abroad

Minors need to have a consent form signed by both parents for travel abroad. A notary must confirm this consent.³⁹⁵ If a child travels abroad with one parent, the written consent of the other parent is required. This must also be approved by a notary.³⁹⁶

3.1.6.6 Legal custody of minors

Legal custody of a child is vested in a guardian or trustee when there are no parents or adoptive parents, when a court terminates the parents' legal custody of a child and in cases where such natural persons have been deprived of parental care for other reasons, particularly when parents have neglected their parental responsibilities or failed to protect the rights and interests of the child.³⁹⁷ This situation also occurs when parents refuse to take a child back from institutional care.³⁹⁸ If the child is younger than fourteen years of age, a guardian will be appointed.³⁹⁹ If the child is between fourteen and eighteen years of age, a trustee will be appointed.⁴⁰⁰ The local guardianship authority, which operates under the local executive authorities, is usually the body that initially has legal custody of a child. Within three months, this body will appoint a guardian or a trustee.⁴⁰¹ According to one source, this is usually a close relative.⁴⁰²

Children without parental care can be placed with close relatives, family friends, an adoptive family or a foster home.⁴⁰³ In most cases, close relatives take over the care of minors who have been left without the care of their parents.⁴⁰⁴ Each year,

³⁹¹ Article 4 of the Law on Passports.

³⁹² ASAN, *Issuance and replacement of national passports*, <https://asan.gov.az/en/service/asan-xidmetler/uemumvetendas-pasportlarinin-verilmesi-ve-deyisdirilmesi>, consulted on 15 May 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁹³ According to the ASAN service website, there are 27 ASAN service centres in Azerbaijan. Citizens can visit these centres for a wide range of government services, including the issuance of identity cards and passports and the renewal of driving licences; ASAN, 'ASAN service' centers, <https://asan.gov.az/en/service-centers/asan-xidmetler>, consulted on 15 May 2024; ASAN, *Notary service*, <https://asan.gov.az/en/category/asan-xidmetler/notariat-fealiyyeti>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

³⁹⁴ Article 8 of the Law on Passports; Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Passport*, <https://london.mfa.gov.az/en/content/57/passport>, consulted on 15 May 2024; ASAN, *Issuance and replacement of national passports*.

³⁹⁵ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

³⁹⁶ Article 11.2 of the Migration Code.

³⁹⁷ Article 33.3 CLC.

³⁹⁸ Article 114.1 of the Family Law Code.

³⁹⁹ Article 33.4 CLC.

⁴⁰⁰ Article 33.6 CLC.

⁴⁰¹ Article 35.1 CLC; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁰² Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁰³ CRC, *Replies of Azerbaijan to the list of issues in relation to its combined fifth and sixth reports (CRC/C/AZE/RQ/5-6)*, 26 May 2022, p. 26.

⁴⁰⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

there are several hundred adoption cases.⁴⁰⁵ Most adoptions are also done by relatives.⁴⁰⁶ If these options are not available, the child is usually placed in institutional care.⁴⁰⁷ The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population is responsible for the decision on such placement.⁴⁰⁸ If a child is placed in institutional care, the director of the relevant institution may be appointed as the guardian.⁴⁰⁹ Several types of shelter facilities are discussed below.

3.1.6.7 Infant homes

According to information from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population, in 2021, there were two infant homes for the medical care of infants and toddlers from birth to three years of age, which also housed orphans and children without parental care.⁴¹⁰ These facilities fell under the auspices of the Ministry of Health.⁴¹¹ Medical staff were employed in infant homes. They thus had the character of hospitals.⁴¹²

3.1.6.8 Boarding schools

According to information from the State Statistics Committee from 2023, there were 25 boarding schools for general education for children between the ages of three and eighteen years. Three of these schools were intended for orphans and children without parental care.⁴¹³ In addition, according to government information from 2024, the number of boarding schools, which fell under the Ministry of Science and Education, decreased from 44 to 15. In the 2022-2023 school year, there were 4 boarding schools intended for children without parental care, which fell under the Ministry of Science and Education. In that school year, 558 schoolchildren attended these 4 boarding schools, including 16 children who had lost both parents. For the 2023-2024 school year, these 4 boarding schools had been converted to general education boarding schools.⁴¹⁴

According to one source, the schoolchildren stayed overnight in these boarding schools during the week. They went to see their parents on weekends.⁴¹⁵ According to various sources, the children who had no parents stayed in these boarding schools throughout the year.⁴¹⁶ Formally, the children in these boarding schools had everything they needed for education, shelter and medical support. According to various sources, however, the quality of care was low.⁴¹⁷ According to one source,

⁴⁰⁵ AzerNews, *Around 215 children adopted in 2022*, 31 January 2023; DSK, *Children in Azerbaijan, 2023: Statistical yearbook*, 28 November 2023, p. 79; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁰⁶ Chaikhana, *Whispers of the past: Secrets of Azerbaijani families*, 17 August 2023.

⁴⁰⁷ Article 116.1 of the Family Law Code; Trend, *Heydar Aliyev Foundation organizes entertainment events for children*, 26 August 2023; DSK, *Children in Azerbaijan, 2023: Statistical yearbook*, 28 November 2023, p. 77.

⁴⁰⁸ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁰⁹ Article 138.1 of the Family Law Code.

⁴¹⁰ The World Bank, *Social services for adults and children*, 28 June 2023, p. 17.

⁴¹¹ DSK, *Children in Azerbaijan, 2021: Statistical yearbook*, 2021, p. 75; DSK, *Alternative child care in the Republic of Azerbaijan*, March 2024.

⁴¹² Rashad Huseynov & Farida Abbasova, Azerbaijan. In: Ilze Earner & Alexandra Telitsyna (red.), *The development of child protection systems in the post-Soviet states. A twenty five years perspective*, Springer, 2021, p. 18; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴¹³ DSK, *Education, science and culture in Azerbaijan*, 17 October 2023, p. 69; DSK, *Children in Azerbaijan, 2023: Statistical yearbook*, 28 November 2023, p. 77.

⁴¹⁴ CESCR, *Information received from Azerbaijan on follow-up to the concluding observations on its fourth periodic report (E/C.12/AZE/FCO/4)*, 7 February 2024, p. 4.

⁴¹⁵ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁴¹⁶ UN, *Experts of the Committee on the Rights of the Child praise Azerbaijan's improved birth registration rate, ask about the mandate of the Ombudsman and deinstitutionalisation policies*, 24 January 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴¹⁷ CRC, *Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Azerbaijan (CRC/C/AZE/CO/5-6)*, 22 February 2023, p. 7; confidential source, January 2024.

the quality of the facilities was not adequate for children, especially in terms of re-integration. In many cases, psychological support was also lacking.⁴¹⁸

According to one source, the children stayed in the boarding schools until the age of eighteen years, unless they were studying at institutions of higher education. Otherwise, they had to leave and live independently.⁴¹⁹ According to various sources, the 'alumni house' had been built for that purpose in the village of Masazır in the district of Abşeron.⁴²⁰ According to one source, it was rare for a child to progress to university from a boarding school, as the quality of education in the boarding schools was low.⁴²¹ According to another source, only twenty percent of young people who had been in boarding schools managed to build an independent life without problems. The rest struggled with alcohol or drug addiction, due to various problems, or ended up in crime. Girls were the most vulnerable in this regard. They sometimes ended up in prostitution.⁴²²

3.1.6.9 Children's homes

According to information from the State Statistics Committee for 2021, there were 9 children's homes for the care of children between the ages of three and eighteen years.⁴²³ Furthermore, according to information from the State Statistics Committee, there were 12 children's homes in 2022.⁴²⁴ As of December 2023, Children's Home number 1 in the urban district of Nizami, Children's Home number 2 in the urban district of Surakhani (Suraxanı), Children's Home number 3 in the urban district of Khatai (Xətai), the children's home in Ganja (Gəncə), the children's home in Şeki (Şəki) and the Osman Mirzayev children's home in Lankaran (Lənkəran) fell under the auspices of the Social Services Agency (*Sosial Xidmətlər Agentliyi*, SXA) of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population.⁴²⁵ According to one source, the children staying in these children's homes attended regular schools during the day.⁴²⁶

According to various sources, the children's homes were closed institutions that were not transparent to the outside world (e.g. with reports).⁴²⁷ According to one source, the quality of the facilities was not adequate for children. They were not given enough food, proper mental support in their development or proper education. One indication of this was that these children rarely went on to university.⁴²⁸ According to another source, reports of violence, sexual abuse, forced labour and poor food quality in the children's homes sometimes emerged through the media (including social media).⁴²⁹ For example, in an interview for a local television channel in 2023, a sixteen-year-old boy complained about the conditions in Children's Home number 3. According to him, the children there were not well fed, as employees were taking most of the food for themselves. For breakfast, they were given only a piece of bread with very few toppings. They begged for food at the

⁴¹⁸ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴¹⁹ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴²⁰ JAMnews, *A trip to the 'Alumni House', whose address even Google Maps doesn't know*, 30 November 2023; DOST, *Social service institutions*; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴²¹ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁴²² Confidential source, January 2024.

⁴²³ DSK, *Children in Azerbaijan, 2021: Statistical yearbook*, 2021, p. 75.

⁴²⁴ DSK, *Children in Azerbaijan, 2023: Statistical yearbook*, 28 November 2023, p. 77; DSK, *Alternative child care in the Republic of Azerbaijan*, March 2024.

⁴²⁵ Cabinet Decree of 5 December 2023 (number 436), <https://e-qanun.az/framework/55702>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁴²⁶ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴²⁷ CRC, *Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Azerbaijan (CRC/C/AZE/CO/5-6)*, 22 February 2023, p. 7; confidential source, January 2024.

⁴²⁸ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁴²⁹ Confidential source, February 2024.

buffet and from classmates. The director of the children's home denied the boy's accusations. The day after this interview, the boy was transferred to a psychiatric hospital. A doctor at this hospital stated that the boy was normal and not mentally ill and that he had sent the boy back to the children's home. The doctor was subsequently dismissed.⁴³⁰

3.1.6.10 Small-scale group homes

Since 2013, Şüvelan (Şüvəlan) in the urban district of Khazar (Xəzər) in Baku had been home to a Turkish-style small-scale group home for ten orphan girls. Furthermore, a small-scale group home for twelve orphan boys was present in the city of Lankaran since 2016. From the children's homes, school-aged children could be selected for these group homes. Children could stay there until the age of eighteen years, or 23 years if they were still studying.⁴³¹ Since December 2023, both of these group homes have been under the auspices of the Social Services Agency of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population.⁴³²

3.1.6.11 SOS Children's Villages

SOS Children's Villages had locations in the city of Ganja and in the city of Baku. In 2022, 92 children received family care there. These two locations had SOS mothers working full-time with these children. SOS Children's Villages provided family care to children without parental care or who were at risk of abandonment.⁴³³ Admission was made based on a decree of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population.⁴³⁴ Children between three and ten years of age could be placed there. One of several exceptions to this rule occurred when there were three siblings, one of whom was older than ten years. According to the law, they were not allowed to be separated from each other.⁴³⁵ SOS Children's Villages did not focus on specific target groups. Some groups were excluded from care, however, including children whose parents were both alive, children with severe mental health problems and children with serious health problems.⁴³⁶ The children placed with SOS Children's Villages remained there until they were eighteen years of age. If they were studying, they could stay there until the age of 23 years.⁴³⁷ The children went from the shelter locations to regular nurseries and/or schools. A GP was present in each shelter location.⁴³⁸ According to one source, the quality of the facilities was good.⁴³⁹ According to another source, some children managed to go on to university from SOS Children's Villages.⁴⁴⁰ Children returning from abroad could also be accommodated in SOS Children's Villages if they met the criteria.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁰ JAMnews, *Teenager from orphanage in Baku placed in psychiatric hospital for 'criticism'*, 5 April 2023; OC Media, *Top Baku psychiatrist dismissed after declaring teenager 'not mentally ill'*, 6 April 2023; Turan, *Who called a teenager mentally ill for his criticizing conditions in an orphanage?*, 6 April 2023.

⁴³¹ Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Small group home for orphans opens in Lankaran*, 21 June 2016; The World Bank, *Social services for adults and children*, 28 June 2023, pp. 16-17; CESC, *Information received from Azerbaijan*, 7 February 2024, p. 5; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴³² Cabinet Decree of 5 December 2023 (number 436).

⁴³³ IOM, *Azerbaijan. Country fact sheet 2022*, December 2022, p. 12; SOS Children's Villages Azerbaijan, *Annual Report 2022. A loving home for every child...*, 6 September 2023, p. 4; SOS Children's Villages, *Azerbaijan*, <https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/where-we-help/asia/azerbaijan>, consulted on 15 May 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴³⁴ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴³⁵ SOS Children's Villages Azerbaijan, *SOS Azerbaijan*, <https://www.soschildrens.org/en/sos-azerbaycan>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁴³⁶ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴³⁷ Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴³⁸ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴³⁹ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁴⁰ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁴¹ IOM, *Azerbaijan. Country fact sheet 2022*, December 2022, p. 12; confidential source, February 2024.

3.1.6.12 Emergency shelter facilities

There were three shelter facilities where children without parental care could stay for a few days to a few months. Thereafter, they had to be either reunited with their relatives or placed in institutional care. According to one source, there have been cases of children staying in these emergency shelters for more than a year.⁴⁴² The first concerned the Shelter and Social Rehabilitation Institution for Vulnerable Groups of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population (see 3.1.5.2).⁴⁴³ According to one source, the quality of this shelter was not of a high standard.⁴⁴⁴ In addition, the NGO Azerbaijan Children Union (*Azərbaycan Uşaqları İctimai Birliyi*) manages a shelter facility in the urban district of Binagadi. This NGO provided temporary shelter for trafficking victims and potential trafficking victims. It also provided support to the children of these victims.⁴⁴⁵ According to one source, government financial support for this shelter was limited. Financial support from abroad was not possible, due to legal restrictions on NGOs. As a result, this shelter generally could not provide the required care and guidance to children.⁴⁴⁶ In addition, one NGO managed the transitional home Place of Hope (*Ümid Yeri*) in the urban district of Bina (Binə) in Baku. It was intended for the temporary care of street children and mothers with young children.⁴⁴⁷ According to one source, the quality of this transitional home was not good.⁴⁴⁸

3.2 Compliance and violations

3.2.1 Freedom of expression

Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) concerns the freedom of expression. Azerbaijan is a party to the ECHR and thus obliged to abide by it.⁴⁴⁹ The Constitution also guarantees freedom of expression.⁴⁵⁰ During the reporting period, however, Azerbaijan took an increasingly intolerant stance on freedom of expression in general. Less and less space was available for civil society. NGOs were increasingly linked and subordinated to the government.⁴⁵¹

The right to freedom of expression, internet freedom and independent journalism remained under pressure. This pressure increased with media legislation that entered into force on 8 February 2022. This legislation decreased pluralism within the media landscape.⁴⁵² Since autumn 2023, further deterioration has been observed in situations relating to freedom of expression. High-impact events in this regard included the arrests of employees of the independent media channel *Abzas*

⁴⁴² Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁴³ The World Bank, *Social services for adults and children*, 28 June 2023, p. 15; DOST, *Social service institutions*.

⁴⁴⁴ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁴⁵ IOM, *The representatives of IOM mission to Azerbaijan visited the shelter of Azerbaijan Children Union*, 31 December 2019; Chaikhana, *Loopholes stifle Azerbaijan's anti-child labor reform*, 14 July 2022; JAMnews, *Early marriage in Azerbaijan – is the problem getting worse?*, 16 November 2023.

⁴⁴⁶ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁴⁷ OC Media, *Azerbaijani mother of three murdered in crisis shelter*, 16 March 2022; JAMnews, *'Society does not require anyone to be punished'. How Azerbaijan reacts to cases of violence against children*, 6 June 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁴⁸ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁴⁴⁹ Treaty Database, *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Parties* <https://verdragenbank.overheid.nl/en/Treaty/Details/005132>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁴⁵⁰ Article 47 and Article 50 of the Constitution.

⁴⁵¹ Confidential source, March 2024; confidential source, March 2024.

⁴⁵² RFE/RL, *A new draconian media law in Azerbaijan gives the government the power to decide what's news*, 20 February 2022; Venice Commission, *Azerbaijan. Joint opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) of the Council of Europe on the Law on Media*, 20 June 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

Media in November 2023 and of employees of the independent media channel *Toplum TV* in March 2024 (see 3.2.1.5).⁴⁵³

3.2.1.1 Human rights activists

According to several sources, the position of human rights defenders remained as poor as ever.⁴⁵⁴ There were reports of human rights activists falling victim to smear campaigns. The spreading of sensitive personal messages, incriminating (nude) photos, videos and audio recordings through social media and the internet was a common phenomenon. This incriminating information is also known as *kompromat* (compromising material).⁴⁵⁵ There were also reports of human rights activists being targeted in cyber attacks.⁴⁵⁶ Some activists had their bank accounts blocked.⁴⁵⁷ In a small number of cases, travel bans were imposed.⁴⁵⁸ They could also be faced with threats.⁴⁵⁹ During the reporting period, there were several reports of human rights defenders facing maltreatment, arrest, administrative detention or criminal detention. For example, they had expressed criticism through social media or participated in a peaceful demonstration.⁴⁶⁰ This was sometimes followed by conviction under administrative law for hooliganism (Article 510 CoAO) or failure to obey police orders (Article 535.1 CoAO).⁴⁶¹ In some cases, criminal conviction followed.⁴⁶² The charges were sometimes drug-related, for example, under Article 234.4.3 CC (large-scale drug trafficking).⁴⁶³ On 18 March 2024, the UFPPA published a list containing the names of 288 political prisoners, including 2 in the category of human rights defenders.⁴⁶⁴ Several cases of human rights activists who faced arrest and detention during the reporting period are described below. This overview is by no means exhaustive.

On 28 January 2022, a Yevlakh (Yevlax) district court sentenced a lawyer to five months in prison for defamation (Article 147.2 CC). This was related to a broadcast on the YouTube channel *AzerFreedom TV*, in which he spoke about the Terter case (see 3.3.4). On 5 March 2022, a higher court acquitted him. On 9 June 2022, a

⁴⁵³ Council of Europe, *Abzas Media's executive director and editor-in-chief detained, newsroom raided*, 27 December 2023; Freedom Now, *Azerbaijan: New crackdown threatens civil society*, 24 January 2024; Amnesty International, *Azerbaijan: Campaign of intimidation against independent media continues with raid on Toplum TV*, 7 March 2024.

⁴⁵⁴ NHC, *Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) submission on Azerbaijan*, 16 November 2023, p. 1; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁵⁵ France 24, *Azerbaijan activists sound alarm over wave of killings of women*, 10 November 2021; Global Voices, *In Azerbaijan, domestic violence activists are becoming the targets*, 21 April 2022; Amnesty International, *Amnesty International report 2021/22*, 29 March 2022, p. 83; Global Voices, *Azerbaijan's thriving feminist movement: challenges and perspectives*, 28 October 2022; OC Media, *Intimate footage of imprisoned Azerbaijani activist leaked*, 27 February 2023; OCCRP, *How revenge porn is used to silence dissidents in Azerbaijan*, 4 April 2023; confidential source, December 2023; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁵⁶ AIW, *A year in review – from online attacks to overall environment of internet censorship in Azerbaijan*, 16 December 2022; AIW, *State sponsored harassment and targeting in Azerbaijan is very much alive and kicking – a year in review*, 10 March 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom on the net 2023, Azerbaijan*, 4 October 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

⁴⁵⁷ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 38; confidential source, January 2024.

⁴⁵⁸ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 30; confidential source, January 2024.

⁴⁵⁹ OC Media, *Activist claims to have been kidnapped over criticism of Azerbaijani minister*, 26 April 2022; confidential source, January 2024.

⁴⁶⁰ Turan, *Muslim Unity Movement activist detained*, 7 July 2021; Caucasian Knot, *'Muslim Unity' activist sentenced to six years of imprisonment in Azerbaijan*, 21 May 2022; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024.

⁴⁶¹ Turan, *Public activist Mohaddin Orujev arrested for 30 days*, 20 October 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani activist given 30-day sentence 'for criticising president online'*, 21 October 2023; JAMnews, *Co-founder of new political platform in Azerbaijan arrested*, 25 December 2023.

⁴⁶² Turan, *Taleh Hasamedov arrested for 3 months*, 19 September 2023; Turan, *Public activist Rail Abbasov detained*, 20 September 2023.

⁴⁶³ Turan, *Court sentences religious activist to 6 years of imprisonment*, 20 May 2022; JAMnews, *Imprisoned member of Muslim Unity movement went on dry hunger strike in Azerbaijan*, 16 June 2022.

⁴⁶⁴ UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, pp. 18-19.

Yevlakh district court sentenced him to six months in prison for insult (Article 148 CC) following the broadcast on the Terter case.⁴⁶⁵

The noted human rights activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev (Bəxtiyar Hacıyev) faced threats. On the night of April 21-22, 2022, four masked men abducted him. As his abductors filmed him, they tortured and humiliated him. Amongst other things, they demanded that he remove some critical posts about the Minister of Internal Affairs. His abductors then left him tied up in a deserted area. On 23 April 2022, the Minister of Internal Affairs stated that an investigation would take place.⁴⁶⁶

Eight months later, on 9 December 2022, the authorities arrested Bakhtiyar Hajiyev on charges of hooliganism (Article 221.2.2 CC). This was purportedly related to an argument with a television reporter. Other allegations followed. In February 2024, the prosecutor listed all the charges in court. The list consisted of offences under Article 192.1 (illegal entrepreneurship), 193-1.3.2 (legalisation of property obtained from crime), 206.1 (smuggling), 213.1 (tax evasion), 221.2.2 (hooliganism), 289.1 (contempt of court), 320.1 (document forgery) and 320.2 (use of forged documents). At the end of the reporting period, no verdict was known in his case.⁴⁶⁷

On 27 September 2023, Abzas Media (see 3.2.1.5) posted an interview on YouTube, in which an activist anonymously stated that the police had planted seized drugs with political activists so that they could then be arrested for drug offences. On 5 October 2023, the police arrested this interviewee. He was given thirty days of administrative detention for hooliganism (Article 510 CoAO) and failure to obey police orders (Article 535.1 CoAO). After his release, he took a precautionary drug test to prove he was not a drug user. On 4 December 2023, plainclothes officers took him away as he left his home. Authorities charged him with large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC). According to his lawyer, he was not involved in drug trafficking, and the drugs had been planted on his person after his arrest. At the end of the reporting period, no verdict was known in his case.⁴⁶⁸

3.2.1.2 LGBTIQ+ activists

During the reporting period, the visibility of a small number of LGBTIQ+ activists increased. Despite this, they continued to face pressure.⁴⁶⁹ For example, LGBTIQ+ activists took part in a march to mark International Women's Day on 8 March 2022

⁴⁶⁵ Caucasian Knot, *Azerbaijani activist arrested on charge of defamation*, 30 January 2022; Turan, *Activist Ilham Aslanoglu released early from prison*, 6 March 2022; Caucasian Knot, *Baku court overturns verdict to lawyer Ilham Aslanoglu*, 7 March 2022; Turan, *Lawyer Ilham Aslanoglu re-arrested*, 10 June 2022; Caucasian Knot, *Azerbaijani lawyer Ilham Aslanoglu receives new custody term for libel*, 11 June 2022; AIW, *Activist and lawyer Ilham Aslanoglu arrested*, 13 June 2022; Caucasian Knot, *Rights defenders call on the Azerbaijani authorities to release Ilham Aslanoglu*, 14 June 2022.

⁴⁶⁶ Turan, *Bakhtiyar Hajiyev's statement will be investigated – Ministry of Internal Affairs*, 23 April 2022; Turan, *Criminal case initiated in connection with kidnapping Bakhtiyar Hajiyev*, 25 April 2022; OC Media, *Activist claims to have been kidnapped over criticism of Azerbaijani minister*, 26 April 2022.

⁴⁶⁷ Turan, *Bakhtiyar Hajiyev arrested for a month and 20 days*, 9 December 2022; BBC Monitoring, *New charges brought against jailed Azeri activist, party leader's son arrested*, 8 November 2023; Turan, *According to the results of the preliminary investigation, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev is charged under 8 articles of the Criminal Code*, 13 November 2023; Turan, *The indictment was announced at the trial of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev*, 2 February 2024.

⁴⁶⁸ Turan, *Activist Ilhamiz Guliyev detained*, 4 December 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijan detains human rights activist on drug charges*, 6 December 2023; Meydan TV, *Former police officer and rights advocate Ilhamiz Guliyev detained on alleged drug charges*, 6 December 2023; IRFS, *The court arrested activist I. Guliyev for a period of 4 months*, 7 December 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan arrests rights activist on drug-related charges*, 8 December 2023; Turan, *The court of appeal did not release Ilhamiz Guliyev*, 14 December 2023; Blankspot, *Azerbaijani whistleblower detained: 'The police forged evidence'*, 23 December 2023; Turan, *The court extended the term of arrest of activist Ilhamiz Guliyev*, 3 April 2024; European Parliament, *Human rights breaches in Azerbaijan, The Gambia and Hong Kong*, 25 April 2024; confidential source, December 2023.

⁴⁶⁹ Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Azerbaijan: The use of violence and discrimination against feminist and LGBTQ+ communities*, 14 March 2023; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 34; confidential source, February 2024.

in central Baku. In the process, police confiscated an LGBTIQ+ flag, and one participant was forced to remove his rainbow-coloured face mask.⁴⁷⁰ The police further arrested seven activists, including two LGBTIQ+ activists, in Khatai (Xətai) city district on 23 May 2023. They had protested across from a police station because of a confrontation between police and three trans women the night before. Two activists were given fifteen days of administrative detention. One LGBTIQ+ activist was fined 70 manat (about 40 euros) for hooliganism (Article 510 CoAO), and one LGBTIQ+ activist was fined 300 manat (about 160 euros) for illegally transporting drugs (Article 206 CoAO). According to the two LGBTIQ+ activists, the police mistreated and humiliated them because of their alternative gender identity.⁴⁷¹ Furthermore, on 22 November 2023, the pro-government Azerbaijani Press Agency (APA) published an article in which it identified unnamed local LGBTIQ+ and feminist organisations as emissaries of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).⁴⁷²

3.2.1.3 Religious activists

In 2022, bilateral relations with Iran deteriorated. This was in connection with several incidents on both sides, including a deadly attack targeting the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran on 27 January 2023. An Azerbaijani diplomat was killed in the attack, and two security guards were injured.⁴⁷³ The tensions in the bilateral relations affected members of the conservative Shiite Muslim Unity Movement (*Müsəlman Birliyi Hərəkəti*, MBH), which was founded in 2015, as well as other religious activists.⁴⁷⁴ Authorities characterised the MBH as an extremist group with close ties to Iran.⁴⁷⁵ There were several waves of arrests. Estimates of the numbers arrested in these waves ranged from 500 to 5,000. Those arrested included MBH members, former detainees from the Nardaran case,⁴⁷⁶ practising believers who had been on pilgrimage to Karbala and practising believers who had received religious training in Iran.⁴⁷⁷ The largest wave of arrests was in all likelihood at the end of March 2023. One of the events leading to this wave of arrests was the attempted murder of a member of parliament on March 28, 2023. This Sunni member of

⁴⁷⁰ Mikroskop Media, *Feminists held a rally in Baku*, 8 March 2022; Minority Azerbaijan, *Feminists: 'The march ended successfully'*, 8 March 2022; Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Azerbaijan: The use of violence and discrimination against feminist and LGBTQ+ communities*, 14 March 2023.

⁴⁷¹ Minority Azerbaijan, *LGBTQI+ activists who protested detentions of trans community members detained in Baku*, 24 May 2023; JAMnews, *Queer activists in Azerbaijan claim they were subjected to violence at police station*, 24 May 2023; Minority Azerbaijan, *Detained LGBTQI+ activists have made statements*, 25 May 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani activists reportedly detained after protesting detention of transgender women*, 25 May 2023; PACE, *Azerbaijani police must stop harassing LGBTI people and activists, says PACE general rapporteur*, 31 May 2023; HRW, *World report 2024, Azerbaijan*, 11 January 2024, p. 5; ILGA-Europe, *Annual review*, 29 February 2024, p. 36; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁷² APA, *Main instructions of USAID emissaries in Azerbaijan become known – details*, 22 November 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan arrests opposition journalist on hooliganism charges*, 2 December 2023.

⁴⁷³ Eurasianet, *Further strain in Azerbaijan-Iran relations*, 15 March 2023; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijan says it has detained 20 people for allegedly promoting Iranian 'propaganda'*, 19 April 2023.

⁴⁷⁴ OC Media, *Azerbaijan arrests 'Iran-backed militants'*, 3 November 2022; JAMnews, *Violations of religious freedom in Azerbaijan*, 11 July 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024.

⁴⁷⁵ Turan, *Pro-government media 'identified and investigated' a network of 'Iranian spies'*, 13 March 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijan arrests 'Iran-backed militants'*, 3 November 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 1; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁷⁶ See 3.2.2 of the General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan dated 2 July 2020 for more information on the Nardaran case.

⁴⁷⁷ Turan, *PPFA and DME report arrests of their activists after march on Shehid Alley*, 25 January 2023; Eurasianet, *Mass arrests of religious Shias reported in Azerbaijan*, 13 April 2023; OC Media, *Opinion: First they came for the Muslims, and we did not speak out...*, 16 May 2023; Meydan TV, *Targeting faith: Azerbaijan's controversial crackdown on religious believers as response for regional tensions*, 31 May 2023; JAMnews, *Violations of religious freedom in Azerbaijan*, 11 July 2023; Turan, *A new series of arrests of believers*, 20 February 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Unconfirmed reports of arrests of Iranian 'spies' in Azerbaijan*, 21 February 2024; Turan, *The names of some of the believers detained in recent days*, 22 February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

parliament was known for his criticism of Iran.⁴⁷⁸ According to various sources, the State Security Service (*Dövlət Təhlükəsizliyi Xidməti*, DTX) detained an estimated 400 people in and outside Baku during this wave of arrests.⁴⁷⁹ According to one source, hundreds of imams were also questioned and pressured to hand over lists containing the names of people who had collaborated with Iran.⁴⁸⁰

After their arrests, which were often initially on suspicion of espionage and collaboration with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, some religious activists were followed by administrative convictions for various charges, such as hooliganism (Article 510 CoAO).⁴⁸¹ In a number of cases, criminal convictions followed on drug-related or espionage charges.⁴⁸² In early July 2023, the MBH stated that sixty MBH members were imprisoned at that time.⁴⁸³ On 18 March 2024, the UFPPA published a list containing the names of 288 political prisoners who were incarcerated at the time, including 208 (72%) in the category of peaceful religious believers. Of the 208 people in this category, 59 (28%) were members of MBH. One of these was a member of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (*Azərbaycan İslam Partiyası*, AİP), which is not registered with the government.⁴⁸⁴

3.2.1.4 Relatives of human rights activists

According to one source, it was common for relatives of human rights activists to face smear campaigns to pressure their loved ones to cease their activities.⁴⁸⁵ Relatives could also be subject to arrest, threats and administrative detention.⁴⁸⁶ According to one source, their bank accounts were sometimes frozen.⁴⁸⁷ In some cases, they were also subject to travel bans.⁴⁸⁸ According to several sources, relatives of human rights activists sometimes were dismissed because of the activities of their relatives.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁷⁸ AA, *Head of Azerbaijan's Great Order Party injured in armed attack*, 29 March 2023; VOA, *Azerbaijan investigates 'terror attack' after lawmaker is shot and wounded*, 29 March 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani MP survives shooting*, 29 March 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani MP survives shooting*, 30 March 2023; RFE/RL, *Suspects in attempted assassination of Azerbaijani lawmaker placed in pretrial detention*, 5 April 2023; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijan says it has detained 20 people for allegedly promoting Iranian 'propaganda'*, 19 April 2023.

⁴⁷⁹ OC Media, *Opinion: First they came for the Muslims, and we did not speak out...*, 16 May 2023; Meydan TV, *Targeting faith: Azerbaijan's controversial crackdown on religious believers as response for regional tensions*, 31 May 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁸⁰ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁸¹ Turan, *Religious activists tell about police torture*, 23 May 2022; Turan, *Believers detained for slogan: 'Punish those who insulted Allah'*, 20 June 2022; Caucasian Knot, *Human rights defenders: religious activists in Azerbaijan punished too severely*, 21 June 2022; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024.

⁴⁸² Caucasian Knot, *Activist Elshan Abbasov detained in Azerbaijan*, 5 March 2022; Turan, *Mahir Azimov, member of 'Muslim Unity' Movement, detained*, 21 July 2022; OC Media, *Azerbaijani Shiite activist charged with drug trafficking*, 28 November 2022; JAMnews, *Two members of religious movement missing in Baku*, 2 December 2022; AIW, *Religious activist claims his arrest was over his social media posts*, 9 January 2023; IPD, *The judge Hafiz Kamranov grossly violated the right to liberty and personal security of Shahin Qadirli*, 15 January 2023; Turan, *Religious activist dies in courtroom*, 2 March 2023; OC Media, *Hunger striking prisoner dies in Baku court of appeal*, 3 March 2023; Turan, *At the trial of a member of the Muslim Unity Movement*, 21 April 2023; Eurasianet, *Deaths of Islamic figures highlight political and religious divide in Azerbaijan*, 24 March 2023; USCIRF, *Annual report 2023*, 1 May 2023, p. 51; Turan, *A member of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) Mahir Azimov sentenced to 4 years in prison*, 8 July 2023; Turan, *Relatives and associates of the religious activist said about his beating in jail*, 17 July 2023; Turan, *Religious activist hospitalised in serious condition*, 24 August 2023; Turan, *Agaali Yahyaev: A harrowing tale of torture and false confessions amid crackdown on believers*, 7 September 2023; Turan, *Two activists of the "Muslim Unity" sentenced to 4 years in prison*, 19 October 2023; Turan, *Muslim Unity activist sentenced to almost 10 years in prison*, 1 November 2023; IPD, *The Azerbaijani authorities arrest the believers under the pretext that they are drug addicts*, 3 March 2024.

⁴⁸³ Turan, *A member of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) Mahir Azimov sentenced to 4 years in prison*, 8 July 2023.

⁴⁸⁴ UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, pp. 41-134.

⁴⁸⁵ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁸⁶ JAMnews, *Co-founder of new political platform in Azerbaijan arrested*, 25 December 2023; confidential source, March 2024.

⁴⁸⁷ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁴⁸⁸ Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁸⁹ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

3.2.1.5 Journalists

The Constitution guarantees freedom of the press in Azerbaijan.⁴⁹⁰ Nevertheless, independent journalists were under pressure.⁴⁹¹ Azerbaijan was ranked 164th in the 2024 press freedom index by Reporters without Borders (*Reporters sans frontières*, RSF), an international NGO committed to freedom of the press, with a score of 27.99. The ranking lists 180 countries.⁴⁹² In the 2023 press freedom index, Azerbaijan ranked 151st, with a score of 39.93. Furthermore, Azerbaijan ranked 154th in the 2022 press freedom index, with a score of 39.4.⁴⁹³ The country ranked 167th in the 2021 press freedom index, with a score of 41.2.⁴⁹⁴

In practice, almost all traditional media in Azerbaijan were under government control to some extent, leaving the media landscape with little pluralism. There were no fully independent radio and television stations or print media.⁴⁹⁵ There were only a few independent news websites. One example was Abzas Media.⁴⁹⁶ Many journalists applied self-censorship, leading to a lack of critical reporting and domestic independent journalism.⁴⁹⁷ There were few independent journalists, including journalists from media outlets operating from abroad.⁴⁹⁸ The websites of most critical and independent radio and television stations operating from abroad were blocked. Examples included the news websites of Meydan TV, Azadliq Radio, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).⁴⁹⁹ These news websites were also targets of cyber attacks.⁵⁰⁰ For news outlets, social media played a more important role than traditional news sources did.⁵⁰¹ One example was *Kanal 13*, which had more than 1.6 million subscribers on YouTube in mid-May 2024.⁵⁰²

On 8 February 2022, President Aliyev signed the Law on Media. It replaced the Mass Media Act and the Television and Radio Broadcasting Act.⁵⁰³ This law required journalists and media companies to register in the central media register of the Media Development Agency (*Medianın İnkişafı Agentliyi*, MİA). This was subject to stringent conditions. For example, owners of media companies were required to be Azerbaijani nationals residing in Azerbaijan.⁵⁰⁴ Furthermore, a journalist who had been convicted of certain crimes could be excluded from the media register.⁵⁰⁵ The

⁴⁹⁰ Article 50 of the Constitution.

⁴⁹¹ PACE, *Threats to life and safety of journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan*, 23 March 2023, p. 1; RSF, *Azerbaijan's Ilham Aliyev jails independent journalists to secure his dynasty*, 5 February 2024.

⁴⁹² RSF, *2024 World Press Freedom Index*, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2024>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁴⁹³ RSF, *2023 World Press Freedom Index*, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2023>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁴⁹⁴ RSF, *2021 World Press Freedom Index*, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2021>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁴⁹⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2022 country report Azerbaijan*, 23 February 2022, p. 10; BBC Monitoring, *Explainer: Azerbaijan media's constrained presidential poll coverage*, 31 January 2024; RSF, *Azerbaijan*, <https://rsf.org/en/country/azerbaijan>, consulted on 15 May 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁹⁶ HRW, *Azerbaijan: Crackdown on independent media*, 22 November 2023; confidential source, November 2023.

⁴⁹⁷ VOA, *New media law casts shadow over Azeri media*, 25 May 2022; RSF, *Azerbaijan*; Freedom House, *Freedom on the net 2023, Azerbaijan*, 3 October 2023; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 27.

⁴⁹⁸ RSF, *Six Azerbaijani journalists arrested in two weeks*, 4 December 2023; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁴⁹⁹ OONI, *OONI measurements show ongoing internet censorship in Azerbaijan*, 28 February 2023; IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan*, 2023, p. 5; Freedom House, *Freedom on the net 2023, Azerbaijan*, 4 October 2023; RSF, *Azerbaijan*; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁰⁰ AIW, *News platform targeted online*, 18 June 2020; IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan*, 2023, p. 13.

⁵⁰¹ IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan*, 2023, p. 5; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁰² YouTube, *Kanal13*, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_TneqvSfh-KsIyZMIjVsQ, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁰³ OC Media, *Aliyev signs law to muzzle press*, 9 February 2022; RFE/RL, *A new draconian media law in Azerbaijan gives the government the power to decide what's news*, 20 February 2022; Venice Commission, *Azerbaijan. Joint opinion*, 20 June 2022, p. 4.

⁵⁰⁴ Article 26 of the Law on Media; Venice Commission, *Azerbaijan. Joint opinion*, 20 June 2022, p. 13; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani journalists fight new media registry*, 8 February 2023.

⁵⁰⁵ Article 74 of the Law on Media; Venice Commission, *Azerbaijan. Joint opinion*, 20 June 2022, p. 13; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani journalists fight new media registry*, 8 February 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

law also imposed restrictions on foreign funding.⁵⁰⁶ The law was widely criticised, including with regard to the definition of certain concepts (e.g. journalist and dissemination of mass information) and the vague wording of some sections of the law.⁵⁰⁷ The registration period started on 14 October 2022 and ended in April 2023.⁵⁰⁸ In mid-November 2023, the *Dia.az* website had to cease operations because it was not registered.⁵⁰⁹ At the end of the reporting period, a small number of unregistered media channels were active.⁵¹⁰

During the reporting period, critical and independent journalists faced harassment, arrest, cyber attacks, confiscation and/or destruction of equipment, erasure of film footage and photos from equipment, deletion of posts and videos on social media, fines, assault, travel bans, defamation campaigns, extortion and blocking of bank accounts.⁵¹¹ For example, they had touched on sensitive issues in their coverage, such as the presidential family, religion, corruption and environmental scandals.⁵¹² For 2022, the UK-based NGO Justice for Journalists reported 159 cases of attacks and/or threats against journalists, bloggers and other people working in the media. The authorities were responsible in 81% of these cases.⁵¹³ There had been 215 cases in 2021. The authorities had been responsible in 76% of these cases.⁵¹⁴ There were also several reports of journalists facing arrest on false or unclear charges. Some of them received administrative convictions for charges including posting false information online (Article 388-1.1.1 CoAO), hooliganism (Article 510 CoAO) and not following police orders (Article 535.1 CoAO).⁵¹⁵ Others faced criminal prosecution for charges including defamation (Article 147 CC), insult (Article 148 CC), repeated extortion (Article 182.2.2 CC), money smuggling in association (Article 206.3.2) and large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC).⁵¹⁶ On 18 March 2024, the UFPFA

⁵⁰⁶ Article 26.5 of the Law on Media; RSF, *RSF calls for revision of Azerbaijani bill legalising censorship*, 30 December 2021; Venice Commission, *Azerbaijan. Joint opinion*, 20 June 2022, p. 13; ODIHR, *Azerbaijan, early presidential election, 7 February 2024: Interim report*, 23 January 2024, p. 4.

⁵⁰⁷ CSO Meter, *Brief review of the new Media Law of Azerbaijan*, April 2022, p. 3; Venice Commission, *Azerbaijan. Joint opinion*, 20 June 2022, p. 18; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁰⁸ Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani journalists fight new media registry*, 8 February 2023; JAMnews, *The process of closing 'non-restricted' media outlets through courts had begun in Azerbaijan*, 7 November 2023.

⁵⁰⁹ JAMnews, *The process of closing 'non-restricted' media outlets through courts had begun in Azerbaijan*, 7 November 2023; Turan, *Baku court of appeal (BCA) suspends activity of website dia.az*, 15 November 2023; Meydan TV, *Baku court suspends 'dia.az' website, and sparks debate on media law*, 16 November 2023.

⁵¹⁰ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵¹¹ JAMnews, *Azerbaijani journalist Ayten Mammadova was attacked, received death threats in Baku*, 10 May 2022; IWPR, *Azerbaijani journalist threatened over high-profile trial*, 13 May 2022; RSF, *RSF calls on Azerbaijan to end online harassment of Swedish journalist*, 23 September 2022; Turan, *Police put physical pressures on journalists during Musavat rally*, 16 November 2022; IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan*, 2023, p. 9; JAMnews, *Azerbaijani journalist claims he was threatened by the state security services*, 15 September 2023; JAMnews, *Arrests of 'anti-war' activists in Azerbaijan*, 22 September 2023; *Freedom on the net 2023, Azerbaijan*, 4 October 2023; CPJ, *Azerbaijani authorities charge Kanal 13 journalists Aziz Orujov and Shamo Eminov over alleged foreign donor money, order channel blocked*, 8 January 2024; JAMnews, *Journalist Shahin Rzayev arrested in Azerbaijan*, 16 January 2024; Turan, *'Toplum TV' will continue its activities – Khadija Ismail*, 7 March 2024; JAMnews, *There's a rising trend of arresting female journalists in Azerbaijan*, 20 March 2024; Turan, *Khadija Ismayilova is banned from leaving Azerbaijan*, 23 March 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 26; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵¹² Council of Europe, *Threats to life and safety of journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan*, 23 March 2023, p. 1; RSF, *Police prevent coverage of protests about environmental scandal in Azerbaijan*, 19 September 2023; RSF, *Azerbaijan*; OBCT, *Azerbaijan's crackdown: same old tactics, just different names*, 13 December 2023.

⁵¹³ JFJ, *Attacks on media workers in Azerbaijan in 2022*, 9 November 2023.

⁵¹⁴ JFJ, *Attacks on media workers in 2021: Azerbaijan and Central Asia*, 3 October 2022.

⁵¹⁵ Council of Europe, *Journalist Vugar Mammadov sentenced to administrative detention over interview*, 4 September 2023; JFJ, *Attacks on media workers in Azerbaijan in 2022*, 9 November 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan arrests opposition journalist on hooliganism charges*, 2 December 2023; CPJ, *Azerbaijani journalist Rufat Muradli sentenced to 30 days in jail*, 4 December 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azeri journalist detained for Facebook post set free*, 17 January 2024.

⁵¹⁶ IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan*, 2023, p. 9; Turan, *The head of the site was arrested on charges of extortion*, 11 December 2023; Turan, *Head of 'Azerinfo.az website' detained*, 12 December 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijan detains director of third media outlet*, 12 December 2023; Turan, *Hafiz Babaly detained in connection with the case against Abzas Media employees*, 13 December 2023; Meydan TV, *Detentions of two*

published a list containing the names of 288 political prisoners, including 20 in the category of journalists and bloggers.⁵¹⁷ Several cases of journalists who faced arrest and detention during the reporting period are described below. This overview is by no means exhaustive.

On 5 July 2022 authorities arrested the head of the news website *Demokratik.az* on charges of extortion. According to this journalist, these charges were related to his publications on corruption. On 25 January 2024, the Ganja Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to 6.5 years in prison for repeated extortion (Article 182.2.2 CC).⁵¹⁸

Furthermore, on 10 September 2022, authorities arrested the founder of the news website *Khural TV* (Xural TV). A few days before his arrest, the pro-government news website *Haqqin.az* published an article accusing him of extorting the relatives of a businessman who had been detained. On 26 February 2024, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to nine years in prison for charges including taking bribes (Article 311 CC).⁵¹⁹

An increase in the repression of critical voices could be observed since November 2023. Pro-government media launched an anti-American campaign that included USAID as the main target. This organisation was accused of setting up a spy network and illegally supporting Azerbaijani opposition media and NGOs to interfere in the country's political processes. In several articles, Azerbaijanis who had graduated from universities in the United States were identified as members of the US spy network. The opposition news (and other) websites of Abzas Media, Toplum TV and Fakt Yoxla, as well as those of feminist and LGBTIQ+ organisations were made out to be emissaries of USAID.⁵²⁰ This campaign also targeted Western Europe.⁵²¹ Simultaneous with this anti-American and anti-European campaign, authorities detained several independent journalists. In this regard, the authorities first focused on Abzas Media. Between 20 November 2023 and 13 January 2024, authorities arrested six employees of Abzas Media on charges of smuggling money in association (Article 206.3.2).⁵²² This was based on the discovery of 40,000 euros during a search of the offices of Abzas Media on 20 November 2023. In this action, the police detained the director of Abzas Media and an activist who had provided ICT support to Abzas Media. Reports emerged that they had been placed under

more independent journalists in Azerbaijan spark concern, 14 December 2023; VOA, *Azeri journalist accused of 'hooliganism'*, 18 January 2023; Turan, *Arrested blogger complains about lack of medical care in pre-trial detention centre*, 4 March 2024; Turan, *'Toplum TV' will continue its activities – Khadija Ismail*, 7 March 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan files additional charge against opposition media manager*, 16 March 2024.

⁵¹⁷ UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, pp. 2-17.

⁵¹⁸ Turan, *Head of 'Demokratik.az' website in jail stops hunger strike*, 4 August 2023; Turan, *The court sentenced the editor of the site 'Demokratik.az' to 6.5 years of imprisonment*, 25 January 2024; UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, pp. 2-3; Turan, *The founder of the site went on a hunger strike*, 13 May 2024.

⁵¹⁹ RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani editor, lawyer ordered held in pretrial detention*, 11 September 2022; CPJ, *Azerbaijani journalist Avaz Zeynalli, lawyer Elchin Sadygov remanded for 4 months on bribery charges*, 12 September 2022; VOA, *Azerbaijan detains a journalist and his lawyer*, 13 September 2022; Turan, *The court extended the term of arrest of Avaz Zeynalli*, 29 December 2022; IRFS, *Scandal at the trial in the case of Avaz Zeynalli*, 10 April 2023; Turan, *At the trial in the case of Avaz Zeynalli the floor was given to defense*, 9 February 2024; Turan, *The prosecutor asked to sentence Avaz Zeynalli to 10 years in prison*, 12 January 2024; Turan, *Avaz Zeynalli was sentenced to 9 years, Elnur Shukurov to 4 years*, 26 February 2024; AIW, *Authorities arrest journalist, editor of an online news platform*, 26 February 2024; Meydan TV, *Avaz Zeynalli & Elnur Shukurov sentenced as trial concludes*, 27 February 2024; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani journalist sentenced to 9 years in prison on charges he rejects*, 27 February 2024.

⁵²⁰ BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Azeri pro-government media expose 'US spy network'*, 27 November 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan arrests opposition journalist on hooliganism charges*, 2 December 2023; RFE/RL, *After victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani government takes aim at journalists – and the U.S.*, 6 December 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵²¹ Eurasianet, *Facing expulsion, Azerbaijan quits European parliamentary body*, 25 January 2024; France 24, *How France became the target of Azerbaijan's smear campaign*, 20 February 2024.

⁵²² BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan arrests opposition reporter on smuggling charges*, 1 December 2023; JAMnews, *There's a rising trend of arresting female journalists in Azerbaijan*, 20 March 2024.

enormous pressure and were treated as highly dangerous criminals.⁵²³ According to their lawyer, this action was related to a number of articles about corruption by the political elite, including in tenders in the Karabakh region.⁵²⁴ The following day, police arrested the editor-in-chief of Abzas Media at the Baku airport as she was returning from Europe.⁵²⁵ The announcement followed in February 2024 that the news website would continue its work with an editorial office in Berlin, in collaboration with international media companies. By the end of the reporting period, no judgments were known in the Abzas Media case.⁵²⁶

The authorities also targeted the highly popular and critical *Kanal 13* YouTube channel. On 27 November 2023, police officers arrested the head of this channel on charges of illegally building a house (Article 188.2 CC). The charge of smuggling money in association (Art. 206.3.2 CC) was added on 19 December 2023. At the end of the reporting period, no verdict was known in this case.⁵²⁷

On 6 March 2024, the police raided the offices of Toplum TV, the political movement known as the Institute for Democratic Initiatives (*Demokratik Təşəbbüslər İnstitutu*, IDI) and the opposition movement known as Platform for the Third Republic, founded in December 2023 (*III Respublika Platforması*). In the process, police arrested around twenty employees of Toplum TV and members of the two NGOs. The police sealed the office of Toplum TV. After the raid, the Instagram account and YouTube channel of Toplum TV were taken over. All content, including several thousand videos, was erased. According to several sources, criminal procedure was applied notably less in this case than in previous arrests (e.g. with regard to rules regarding search).⁵²⁸ Searches took place at the homes of two journalists of Toplum TV, as well as at the residence of the president of IDI. On 8 March 2024, two journalists from Toplum TV were released from custody on reporting duty. Five others were given four months of pre-trial detention. Furthermore, on 8 March 2024, authorities arrested the founder of Toplum TV and a member of the Platform for the Third Republic. Searches were also carried out in the process. Both were subsequently given four months of pre-trial detention. The charges in their cases were related to money smuggling in association (Article 206.3.2 CC).⁵²⁹ Articles appeared in pro-government media accusing Toplum TV of propaganda against Azerbaijan and following instructions from Western organisations, including

⁵²³ Turan, *Search started in 'Abzas Media's' office*, 20 November 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani police raid AbzasMedia offices and detain director*, 20 November 2023; Turan, *U.S. 'deeply troubled' by arrest of journalist Ulvi Hasanli*, 21 November 2023; OC Media, *AbzasMedia deputy director charged in ongoing crackdown*, 24 November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵²⁴ OC Media, *Azerbaijani police make more arrests in crackdown on AbzasMedia*, 21 November 2023; JAMnews, *AbzasMedia case: how investigative journalists are hunted in Azerbaijan*, 14 December 2023.

⁵²⁵ Turan, *Sevinj Vagifgyzy is charged with smuggling, faces arrest*, 21 November 2023; Council of Europe, *Abzas Media's executive director and editor-in-chief detained, newsroom raided*, 15 March 2024.

⁵²⁶ BBC Monitoring, *Embattled Azeri website to be operating from abroad*, 1 February 2024; Turan, *'Abzas Media' to be published by new team from abroad*, 2 February 2024.

⁵²⁷ JAMnews, *Another journalist detained in Azerbaijan*, 27 November 2023; Turan, *Smuggling charge brought against head of 'Channel 13'*, 19 December 2023; BBC Monitoring, *Azeri journalist charged with money smuggling*, 19 December 2023; CPJ, *Azerbaijani authorities charge Kanal 13 journalists Aziz Orujov and Shamo Eminov over alleged foreign donor money, order channel blocked*, 8 January 2024; Turan, *Court prolongs terms of pre-trial detention of two journalists*, 19 March 2024; Turan, *The court of appeal rejected the complaint of Aziz Orujev*, 1 April 2024.

⁵²⁸ Confidential source, March 2024; confidential source, March 2024.

⁵²⁹ JAMnews, *The office of yet another independent media in Azerbaijan is sealed, employees are detained*, 7 March 2024; HRW, *New wave of arrests targets journalists and activists in Azerbaijan*, 7 March 2024; Euractiv, *Azerbaijani police raid offices of independent TV station*, 7 March 2024; Turan, *'Toplum TV' will continue its activities – Khadija Ismail*, 7 March 2024; OCCRP, *Azerbaijani police raid Toplum TV and democracy group, detaining 7*, 7 March 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Azeri police raid offices of opposition online TV, political movement*, 7 March 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan releases two opposition journalists*, 9 March 2024; JAMnews, *Toplum TV case in Azerbaijan: Arrests and detentions continue*, 9 March 2024; Turan, *The court arrested Alasgar Mammadli and Ruslan Izzetli for 4 months*, 9 March 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Seven arrested in crackdown on Azeri online opposition TV*, 11 March 2024.

USAID.⁵³⁰ On 14 March 2024, police in Baku summoned the editor-in-chief of Toplum TV for questioning.⁵³¹

3.2.1.6 Relatives of journalists

According to various sources, relatives of journalists encountered problems on the part of the authorities or were threatened. This also applied to relatives of journalists operating from abroad.⁵³² Their bank accounts were sometimes blocked.⁵³³ In a small number of cases, they were subjected to travel bans.⁵³⁴

3.2.1.7 Expressions of criticism

During the reporting period, several reports emerged in the English-language media of individuals facing punitive measures after making a critical remark in an interview or after posting a critical remark on social media, including TikTok and Facebook. For example, they had posted comments about high-ranking figures or spoken out against military operations in the Karabakh region.⁵³⁵ In some cases, police pressured them to remove their comments on social media.⁵³⁶ In other cases, they received administrative detention for charges including spreading false information (Article 388-1.1.1 CoAO) or not following police orders (Article 535.1 CoAO).⁵³⁷ Criminal prosecutions also occurred.⁵³⁸ In some cases, the charges were drug-related, including under Article 234.4.3 CC (large-scale drug trafficking).⁵³⁹ Several cases of individuals who faced arrest and detention following expressions of criticism

⁵³⁰ Caliber.Az, *Over half a million dollars illegally transferred to Azerbaijan via Toplum TV*, 9 March 2024; Aze.Media, *'Georgian network' of anti-Azerbaijani provocations. Why won't Tbilisi react?*, 10 March 2024.

⁵³¹ Turan, *Khadija Ismail summoned for questioning and does not rule out her arrest*, 14 March 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Briefing: Azeri editor refuses to answer police questions about opposition TV*, 15 March 2024.

⁵³² RSF, *Azerbaijan*; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 14; IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan, 2023*, p. 4; Turan, *Alasgar Mammadli's brother-in-law was fired from his job*, 12 March 2024; JAMnews, *Azerbaijan: doctor fired after releasing footage of Toplum TV founder's arrest*, 13 March 2024.

⁵³³ Turan, *The investigation blocked Sevinj Vagifgyzy's mother's pension card*, 18 December 2023; JAMnews, *New trends in Azerbaijan: accusations of smuggling and blocking of bank accounts*, 19 December 2023; RFE/RL, *Payment cards of jailed Azerbaijani journalist's relatives blocked*, 21 December 2023; Turan, *Why have the bank accounts of the relatives of the arrested journalists been blocked?*, 21 December 2023; Amnesty International, *Azerbaijan: Repression escalating ahead of presidential elections*, 6 February 2024.

⁵³⁴ CFWIJ, *Azerbaijan: Families of unjustly detained AbzasMedia journalists face escalating state pressure*, 11 January 2024; confidential source, November 2023.

⁵³⁵ AIW, *Questioning over social media posts critical of government measures raise concern*, 3 August 2022; AIW, *Two website editors, and three social media users questioned over 'disseminating forbidden information on the internet'*, 8 August 2022; Eurasianet, *Smear campaign launched against Azerbaijani 'traitors'*, 20 September 2022; IWPR, *Anti-war sentiments on the rise in Azerbaijan*, 23 September 2022; Turan, *PFFA activist confirms police detained him for criticizing in social media*, 1 November 2022; IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2023, Azerbaijan, 2023*, p. 14; Eurasianet, *Perspectives: Government campaign targets Azerbaijan's anti-war activists*, 13 September 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijan arrests anti-war figures*, 21 September 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan jails critics of Karabakh offensive*, 22 September 2023; Meydan TV, *Azerbaijani anti-war voices silenced: Activists detained as freedom of speech fades*, 26 September 2023; Turan, *'For the usual criticism in social networks, people are either prosecuted...'*, 25 October 2023; Turan, *Blogger Arzu Sayadoglu arrested*, 28 January 2024; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024.

⁵³⁶ Amnesty International, *The state of the world's human rights*, 29 March 2022, p. 83; AIW, *Yet another activist detained over social media post*, 17 January 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 31.

⁵³⁷ AzerNews, *Man jailed for spreading fake report about Azerbaijani army*, 28 July 2022; OC Media, *Azerbaijani activist arrested after post criticising president*, 7 June 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani activists and journalist detained over mine protests*, 23 June 2023; AIW, *Administrative detention handed over social media posts*, 27 June 2023; AIW, *Activist taken from his home after a social media post*, 13 July 2023; Turan, *Youth activist Muharrem Akperov arrested in Azerbaijan for 30 days*, 17 July 2023; *Freedom on the net 2023, Azerbaijan*, 4 October 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijani activist given 30-day sentence 'for criticising president online'*, 21 October 2023; Meydan TV, *Legal experts raise concerns over freedom of expression amidst growing administrative arrests in Azerbaijan*, 31 October 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵³⁸ Freedom House, *Freedom on the net 2023, Azerbaijan*, 4 October 2023.

⁵³⁹ OCCRP, *Azerbaijan detains ex-MP who expressed support for environmental protests*, 7 July 2023; Turan, *'For the usual criticism in social networks, people are either prosecuted...'*, 25 October 2023; Turan, *Activist Jalil Zabidov linked his detention to posts on social networks*, 17 November 2023.

during the reporting period are described below. This overview is by no means exhaustive.

On 20 May 2022, authorities arrested the blogger Raşad Ramazanov (Rəşad Ramazanov), who had returned from Georgia some time earlier. The next day, this was followed by charges of large-scale drug trafficking. According to his wife, this was a fabricated charge. According to one human rights activist, his arrest was linked to his online criticism of the authorities. On 5 February 2024, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to five years and four months in prison for large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC).⁵⁴⁰

Furthermore, on September 22, 2023, authorities arrested a member of ATİŞ (see 3.1.1.2). This was followed by charges of large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC). On 12 January 2024, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to four years in prison for drug possession (Article 234.1.1 CC). According to ATİŞ, this was a fabricated charge, and the conviction was related to his critical posts on social media.⁵⁴¹

3.2.1.8 Expressions of criticism from abroad

A number of critical online initiatives by individuals residing outside Azerbaijan reached a large audience in Azerbaijan. Some of them had large numbers of followers and viewers on social media. For example, the *Azad Söz* (Freedom of Opinion) YouTube channel of the German-based vlogger Tural Sadiqlı had 676,000 subscribers as of mid-May 2024, according to information on YouTube.⁵⁴² Furthermore, the YouTube channel *Osmanqızı TV* of the journalist Sevinc Osmanqızı had 357,000 subscribers as of mid-May 2024.⁵⁴³ The French-based vlogger Mahammad Mirzali's YouTube channel *Made in Azerbaijan* had 338,000 subscribers in mid-May 2024.⁵⁴⁴ The YouTube channel *Haqsızlığa susma!* (Don't be silent about injustice!) of the vlogger Qabil Mammadov (Qabil Məmmədov), who was residing in Germany, had 203,000 subscriptions as of mid-May 2024.⁵⁴⁵ In addition, the YouTube channel *Diktator TV* of the Swiss-based vlogger Manaf Jalilzadə (Manaf Cəlilzadə) had 177,000 subscribers.⁵⁴⁶ Some of them used highly abusive language (e.g. towards the presidential family) in their live broadcasts.⁵⁴⁷

It appeared that the Azerbaijani authorities were monitoring individuals expressing criticism from abroad, especially if they were active and visible. They were often placed under pressure if they had substantial numbers of followers online and if their posts were political in nature or about socio-economic issues. One indication of this has been the numerous cyber attacks on the computers and social media

⁵⁴⁰ Turan, *Blogger Rashad Ramazanov accused of drug trafficking*, 21 May 2022; Council of Europe, *Blogger Rashad Ramazanov jailed for nine years*, 23 May 2023; Caucasian Knot, *Blogger Rashad Ramazanov arrested in Baku*, 23 May 2022; Meydan TV, *Azerbaijani human rights defenders claim they are being harassed in Georgia*, 20 October 2023; Turan, *The court sentenced religious blogger Rashad Ramazanov to 5 years and 4 months in prison*, 5 February 2024; BBC Monitoring, *Azeri blogger jailed for over five years on drug charges*, 6 February 2024; IPD, *The unlawful and unjustified verdict against Rashad Ramazanov*, 3 May 2024.

⁵⁴¹ AIW, *Yet another activist detained over social media posts*, 22 September 2023; Turan, *Human rights activists condemned the arrests of activists for anti-war statements*, 25 September 2023; Turan, *ATPC condemns Ruslan Vahabov's sentence*, 15 January 2024; confidential source, January 2024.

⁵⁴² YouTube, *Azad Soz*, <https://www.youtube.com/@AzadSoz>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁴³ YouTube, *Osmanqızı TV*, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCimrdP8d-ISMM-ztla9pbRg>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁴⁴ For additional information on Mahammad Mirzali, see 3.2.1.6 of the General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan of 14 September 2021; YouTube, *Made in Azerbaijan*, <https://www.youtube.com/@Madeinazerbaijann>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁴⁵ YouTube, *Haqsızlığa susma!*, <https://www.youtube.com/@haqsizligasusma6498>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁴⁶ YouTube, *Diktator TV*, <https://www.youtube.com/@manafjalilzade>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁴⁷ Confidential source, October 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

accounts of individuals and media outlets operating from abroad.⁵⁴⁸ According to several sources, the authorities had offered money to some individuals expressing criticism from abroad in exchange for ceasing their activities, for positive coverage of Azerbaijan and/or for cooperation.⁵⁴⁹ When people did not allow themselves to be bribed and continued with their activities, threats sometimes followed through social media or by telephone. They could also become victims of smear campaigns and hate campaigns.⁵⁵⁰ According to one source, subsequent further physical violence could not be ruled out.⁵⁵¹ In the recent past, some individuals in Western Europe expressing criticism from abroad had been physically attacked.⁵⁵² One well-known example was the vlogger Mahammad Mirzali, who was residing in France. He had been physically attacked in 2020 and 2021.⁵⁵³ On 12 June 2022, French police arrested two people at a toll gate under suspicion of plotting an assassination attempt on Mirzali. It involved a person of Azerbaijani nationality and a Turkish Moldovan.⁵⁵⁴ According to one source, another tactic used to ensure that these individuals abroad ceased their activities was threatening their relatives in Azerbaijan.⁵⁵⁵

3.2.2 *Freedom of religion and belief*

Most residents of Azerbaijan consider themselves Shiite Muslims. No figures are available on the exact number of Muslims or on the breakdown between Shiites and Sunnis.⁵⁵⁶ According to government information from 2021, about 96% of the population was Muslim. The remaining 4% included Christians, Jews and Baha'is.⁵⁵⁷

3.2.2.1 Law on Freedom of Religious Belief

According to the Constitution, Azerbaijan is a secular state, and all religions are equal before the law.⁵⁵⁸ During the reporting period, the state increased control over religious organisations, primarily through the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief.⁵⁵⁹ Under this law, religious organisations are not allowed to function without government registration.⁵⁶⁰ This law also requires authorities to approve the

⁵⁴⁸ Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan*, 14 September 2021, p. 68; AIW, *Exiled blogger says his life is in danger*, 3 June 2022; confidential source, December 2023.

⁵⁴⁹ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 14; confidential source, May 2024.

⁵⁵⁰ AIW, *Exiled blogger says his life is in danger*, 3 June 2022; JAMnews, *Azerbaijani blogger accuses Baku authorities of conspiring against him after he left the country*, 3 June 2022; Eurasianet, *Smear campaign launched against Azerbaijani 'traitors'*, 20 September 2022; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, *Wahlberichte nicht erwünscht*, 6 February 2024; confidential source, December 2023.

⁵⁵¹ Confidential source, March 2024.

⁵⁵² IPD, *Aliyev extends hunt on his political opponents outside of Azerbaijani borders*, 6 February 2020; IRFS, *Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety calls on Azerbaijani government to stop illegal extraterritorial repressive and punitive persecution of its critics in exile*, 16 June 2022; Caucasian Knot, *Azerbaijani activist Vidadi Iskenderov attacked in France*, 17 June 2022; Turan, *IRFS urged Baku to stop persecuting its critics abroad*, 17 June 2022; Caucasian Knot, *French police guard Azerbaijani activist*, 23 June 2022; Turan, *Critic of the Azerbaijani authorities in Germany was attacked*, 21 November 2022; Meydan TV, *Azerbaijani blogger living in Germany was attacked in Berlin*, 22 November 2022.

⁵⁵³ For additional information on this point, see 3.2.1.6 of the General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan of 14 September 2021.

⁵⁵⁴ Ouest-France, *Interpellés près d'Angers, venaient-ils tuer un blogueur azéri sous protection policière?*, 14 June 2022; RSF, *Hit men sent to France to kill Azerbaijani blogger who is Aliyev foe*, 14 June 2022; IRFS, *Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety calls on Azerbaijani government to stop illegal extraterritorial repressive and punitive persecution of its critics in exile*, 16 June 2022; Turan, *IRFS urged Baku to stop persecuting its critics abroad*, 17 June 2022; Turan, *Who 'ordered' Mohammed Mirzali?*, 17 June 2022; Council of Europe, *Suspected assassination attempt on exiled Azeri blogger Mahammad Mirzali*, 24 June 2022.

⁵⁵⁵ Confidential source, December 2023.

⁵⁵⁶ Confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, December 2023.

⁵⁵⁷ UN International Human Rights Instruments, *Common core document forming part of the reports of states parties: Azerbaijan (HRI/CORE/AZE/2021)*, 24 November 2021, p. 2.

⁵⁵⁸ Article 18 of the Constitution; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 country report Azerbaijan*, 19 March 2024, p. 7.

⁵⁵⁹ USCIRF, *Annual report 2023*, 1 May 2023, p. 50; Meydan TV, *Targeting faith: Azerbaijan's controversial crackdown on religious believers as response for regional tensions*, 31 May 2023.

⁵⁶⁰ Article 12 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief.

distribution of religious literature.⁵⁶¹ The body granting this approval is the State Committee on Religious Associations. The religious literature that is allowed to be distributed can be identified by the special control stickers of this committee.⁵⁶² Without permission, the production, import, export, distribution and sale of religious literature may be punishable by a fine or incarceration for up to two years.⁵⁶³

3.2.2.2 Appointment of clerics

The Law on Freedom of Religious Belief was amended on 11 March 2022. In this regard, responsibility for the appointment and re-appointment of Islamic clerics was completely transferred from the Bureau for Caucasian Muslims (*Qafqaz Müsəlmanları İdaresi*, QMİ) to the State Committee on Religious Associations. This committee appoints a cleric for five years each time.⁵⁶⁴ Mosques and shrines that no longer have clerics appointed by the State Committee are required to suspend their activities. In addition, the committee grants approval for the appointment of all non-Islamic clerics.⁵⁶⁵ On 22 April 2022, the State Committee laid down the rules for the appointment, re-appointment and dismissal of Islamic clerics. These rules stipulated that all Islamic clerics had to appear before a nine-member review committee every five years.⁵⁶⁶ The State Committee was also allowed to dismiss clerics at any time. For example, according to the Norway-based human rights organisation *Forum 18*, the State Committee dismissed an imam in the city of Neftçala in early May 2022 because he held the festive prayer after Ramadan on 3 May 2022, based on his own observation, instead of on 2 May 2022, the date set by the Bureau for Caucasian Muslims.⁵⁶⁷

Clerics who had received their religious training outside Azerbaijan were generally not eligible for appointment by the State Committee. Clerics leading prayer without permission could be punished with fines or incarceration.⁵⁶⁸ For example, this happened to the Iran-educated Shiite theologian Sardar Babayev (Sərdar Babayev). Since 2009, he had been delivering the Friday afternoon sermons at a mosque in the city of Masallı. From 2017 to February 2020, Babayev served a prison sentence for violating regulations on performing religious ceremonies (Article 168-1.3 CC). On 19 October 2021, the State Security Service arrested him again. On 28 September 2023, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to seventeen years in prison for spying on behalf of Iran (Article 274 CC).⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶¹ Article 22 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief.

⁵⁶² Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: European court fines regime for religious censorship*, 24 February 2020; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Will state committee return religious books seized in 2007?*, 18 July 2023; Trend, *Azerbaijan registers two religious communities in 2023 – State Committee*, 30 January 2024.

⁵⁶³ Article 167-2.1 CC; News.az, *Azerbaijan detains 8 people engaged in illegal religious propaganda*, 9 March 2022; USCIRF, *Country update: Azerbaijan*, 5 December 2023, p. 3.

⁵⁶⁴ Article 8 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan set to expand state control of religion*, 16 February 2022; Turan, *Competition announced to fill vacant positions in country's mosques*, 25 October 2022; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: State appointment of all imams now in law*, 14 March 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 5.

⁵⁶⁵ Article 8 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 1.

⁵⁶⁶ Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Direct regime employing and firing imams is 'role of a religious organisation'*, 10 June 2022; Turan, *The certification of Islamic clerics has begun*, 4 March 2024.

⁵⁶⁷ Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Direct regime employing and firing imams is 'role of a religious organisation'*, 10 June 2022.

⁵⁶⁸ Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Multiple fines for Muslims meeting for prayer in homes*, 9 December 2022; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Fined for religious celebration, then arrested*, 21 April 2023; USCIRF, *Country update: Azerbaijan*, 5 December 2023, p. 3.

⁵⁶⁹ Turan, *Theologian arrested for spying on Iran accused of porn blackmail*, 11 November 2021; OC Media, *Azerbaijani Shia theologian 'recorded secret sex tapes' of others*, 12 November 2021; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Treason case against imam Sardar Babayev 'clearly fabricated'*, 15 June 2022; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Multiple fines for Muslims meeting for prayer in homes*, 9 December 2022; Turan, *Shiite theologian Sardar Babayev sentenced to 17 years in prison*, 28 September 2023; ECHR, *Case of Sardar Babayev v. Azerbaijan – judgment*, 1 February 2024; Turan, *The ECHR has declared unlawful the criminal prosecution of the theologian Sardar Babayev*, 1 February 2024; Turan, *Theologian Sardar Babayev imprisoned in punishment cell*, 14 February 2024.

3.2.2.3 Registration of religious organisations

To qualify for registration, a religious organisation was required to have at least fifty members.⁵⁷⁰ The State Committee has registered religious organisations since 1 September 2009. In early 2024, there were 994 active religious organisations. Of these organisations, 957 were Islamic and 37 were non-Islamic. The latter category consisted of 26 Christian organisations, 8 Jewish organisations, 2 Baha'i organisations and 1 Hare Krishna organisation. Also registered were 5 religious training institutes, 2,258 mosques, 748 sacred graves and sacred places, 16 churches and 7 synagogues.⁵⁷¹ According to the State Committee's website, the last registration of an Islamic religious organisation was dated 28 April 2023. This involved an Islamic organisation from the village of Khirmandalı (Xırmandalı) in the district of Masallı.⁵⁷² Since 2021, the State Committee has not registered non-Muslim organisations.⁵⁷³

The State Committee could ask courts to halt the activities of registered religious organisations (e.g. because they had acted against their statutes).⁵⁷⁴ Members of unregistered organisations were subject to punishment. They could face raids, detentions, arrests and/or fines.⁵⁷⁵

The law distinguishes between religious centres and religious communities. Only religious centres are allowed to organise pilgrimages abroad in consultation with authorities. In May 2022, the Bureau for Caucasian Muslims announced that individuals older than 65 years were not allowed to join the *Hajj* that year.⁵⁷⁶ According to a report by the Bureau for Caucasian Muslims, the youngest participant that year was 21 years old, and the oldest was 65 years old.⁵⁷⁷ In 2023, there was no age limit.⁵⁷⁸

3.2.2.4 Religious meetings

According to the law, the State Committee had to grant permission for holding religious gatherings at locations other than those approved by the government for that purpose.⁵⁷⁹ Holding religious meetings without permission was subject to punishment.⁵⁸⁰ Forum 18 reported on 20 people who had been fined in 2022 for holding religious meetings for which no permission had been granted.⁵⁸¹ Moreover,

⁵⁷⁰ Article 8 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief; USCIRF, *Country update: Azerbaijan*, 5 December 2023, p. 3.

⁵⁷¹ Trend, *Azerbaijan registers two religious communities in 2023 – State Committee*, 30 January 2024; DQİDK, *Dini sahə ilə bağlı statistik rəqəmlər* (Statistics concerning the religious field), <https://scara.gov.az/az/dini-qurumlar/dini-sahe-ile-bagli-statistik-reqemler>, consulted on 15 May 2023.

⁵⁷² DQİDK, *Müsəlman dini icmalar* (Muslim religious communities), <https://scara.gov.az/az/dini-qurumlar/m%C3%BCselman-dini-icmalar>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁷³ USCIRF, *Annual report 2023*, 1 May 2023, p. 50; DQİDK, *Qeyri-müsəlman dini icmalar* (Non-Muslim religious communities), <https://scara.gov.az/az/dini-qurumlar/qeyri-m%C3%BCselman-dini-icmalar>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁵⁷⁴ Article 12-1 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 5.

⁵⁷⁵ Article 30 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 5; USCIRF, *Country update: Azerbaijan*, 5 December 2023, p. 3.

⁵⁷⁶ Turan, *Azerbaijan's quota for Hajj this year is 680 people*, 7 June 2022; Turan, *Hajj pilgrimage continues to get more expensive*, 16 March 2023; USCIRF, *Annual report 2023*, 1 May 2023, p. 50.

⁵⁷⁷ Turan, *First pilgrim party departs for Mekka*, 28 June 2022.

⁵⁷⁸ Turan, *Hajj pilgrimage continues to get more expensive*, 16 March 2023; APA, *First group of pilgrims from Azerbaijan left for Hajj*, 17 June 2023.

⁵⁷⁹ Article 6-1.2 of the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 7.

⁵⁸⁰ For example, under Article 515.0.3 CoAO (clerics and members of religious organisations holding special meetings for children and young people); USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 2.

⁵⁸¹ Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Multiple fines for Muslims meeting for prayer in homes*, 9 December 2022; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Two women fined for religious work with children*, 13 December 2022.

Forum 18 reported that at least 4 people had been fined in late January 2023 and early February 2023 for holding such meetings.⁵⁸²

3.2.2.5 Supporters of the Gülen movement

The movement of Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic scholar who was residing in the United States, was also known as *Hizmet* (servitude). In the recent past, the Gülen movement in Azerbaijan involved several institutions, including *Qafqaz University*, Turkish primary and secondary schools, the daily newspaper *Zaman* and the television channel *Khazar TV* (Xəzər TV). As a result, many people in Azerbaijan came into contact with this movement. In 2013, the Gülen movement faced problems in Türkiye. This also had repercussions in Azerbaijan. Between 2014 and 2016, many of the Gülen movement's institutions came under the control of the Azerbaijani government and the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic (SOCAR).⁵⁸³ Thereafter, a large number of Turkish nationals who were active for the Gülen movement in Azerbaijan had left. Some were arrested and handed over to Türkiye.⁵⁸⁴ For example, in November 2022, Turkish media reported about a Turkish member of FETÖ who had purportedly been brought to Türkiye from Azerbaijan by the Turkish Security Service (*Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı*, MİT) some time before. This Turkish supporter of Gülen had been residing in Azerbaijan since 2016. Turkish authorities charged him with involvement in an armed terrorist organisation.⁵⁸⁵ Unlike in Türkiye, the Gülen movement in Azerbaijan had not been officially designated as a terrorist organisation.⁵⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Azerbaijani media also used the designation FETÖ.⁵⁸⁷

From 23 July 2023, reports appeared in the Azerbaijani and Turkish media about the arrest in Baku of six people who were purportedly linked to FETÖ, including Qubad İbadoğlu (see 3.1.3.4), on suspicion of counterfeiting currency in association (Article 204.3.1 CC).⁵⁸⁸ On 12 February 2024, pro-government media reported that the criminal case of one of these people had been forwarded to Narimanov city district

⁵⁸² Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: Fined for religious celebration, then arrested*, 21 April 2023.

⁵⁸³ Meydan TV, *The Gulen movement in Azerbaijan and Erdogan's intervention*, 29 October 2021; CAT, *Decision adopted by the committee under article 22 of the Convention, concerning communication No. 905/2018 (CAT/C/74/D/905/2018)*, 10 January 2023, p. 2; Turan, 'The majority of FETÖ members in Azerbaijan were people close to the authorities, and many of them are still in office', 3 August 2023.

⁵⁸⁴ AA, *FETO representative in Azerbaijan extradited to Turkey*, 30 January 2019; APA, *Turkish national intelligence organization conducts operation: Responsible person of FETÖ for Azerbaijan Mehmet Jintosun brought to Türkiye*, 14 April 2023; confidential source, November 2023.

⁵⁸⁵ Turkish authorities held Fethullah Gülen and his movement responsible for the failed attempted coup on 15 July 2016, which resulted in at least 241 fatalities. They referred to the Gülen movement as Fethullah's Terror Organisation (*Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü*, FETÖ); AA, *Turkish intelligence nabs FETÖ/PDY fugitive*, 12 November 2022; *Hürriyet Daily News*, *FETÖ member captured in Azerbaijan*, 14 November 2022; *Daily Sabah*, *Turkish intelligence captures FETÖ fugitive who fled abroad*, 12 November 2022.

⁵⁸⁶ Turan, *Fazil Gasimov faces the same charge as Gubad Ibadoglu*, 8 August 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁸⁷ AzerNews, *Azerbaijan in fight against FETÖ – Turkish general touches on interesting facts*, 25 July 2023; Trend, *Exposing FETO terrorist organization – tough task, says Turkish professor*, 31 July 2023; Turan, 'The majority of FETÖ members in Azerbaijan were people close to the authorities, and many of them are still in office', 3 August 2023; Azerbaijan 24, *Turkish military expert: FETO still exists in Türkiye*, Azerbaijan, 3 August 2023; APA, *Investigation on 4 people arrested for FETÖ in Azerbaijan completed, trial begins*, 12 February 2024.

⁵⁸⁸ APA, *Azerbaijani party chairman, Gubad Ibadoglu detained in connection with FETÖ – Interior ministry*, 23 July 2023; Axar, *Gubad Ibadoglu was detained – official*, 23 July 2023; APA, *Arrest measures chosen for former leaders of FETÖ in Azerbaijan*, 24 July 2023; AA, *Azerbaijan conducts operation targeting FETO-linked individuals*, 24 July 2023; HRW, *Azerbaijan: Opposition leader arrested*, 25 July 2023; *Hürriyet Daily News*, *Azerbaijan detains six linked with FETÖ*, 25 July 2023; Eurasianet, *Prominent Azerbaijani oppositionist arrested, allegedly tortured*, 25 July 2023; OBCT, *Azerbaijan, official Baku goes after its well-known economist*, 26 July 2023; Turan, *A member of FETÖ against Gubad Ibadoglu, an accusation of selling counterfeit money. Is there any truth in this?*, 26 July 2023; Turan, *Fazil Gasimov faces the same charge as Gubad Ibadoglu*, 8 August 2023; JAMnews, *Scientist remanded to Azerbaijan by Turkey arrested in Gubad Ibadoglu case*, 8 August 2023; IWPR, *Azerbaijan: Opposition figure remains in detention*, 9 August 2023; Turan, *Latest developments surrounding Gubad Ibadoglu raise concerns over detention conditions and health*, 9 August 2023; Meydan TV, *New developments in the case against Gubad Ibadoglu: allegations of religious extremism*, 29 August 2023; Fakt Yoxla, *Fake news: Gubad Ibadoglu was arrested on the charge of connection with FETÖ*, 30 August 2023.

court, a criminal case had been forwarded to the Binagadi urban district court and two criminal cases had been forwarded to the Abşeron district court. In early April 2024, an indictment under Article 167.1 CC (forcing the practice of a religion) and Article 228 CC (illegal possession of weapons) was added in one of these cases. At the end of the reporting period, no verdict was known in these cases.⁵⁸⁹

According to various sources, the Gülen movement was not openly active in Azerbaijan during the reporting period.⁵⁹⁰

3.3 Supervision and legal protection

3.3.1 Legal protection

Legally, every citizen is obliged to inform the police about crimes and violations. Failure to report may lead to criminal liability.⁵⁹¹ Reports can be made in person at the police station or by telephone at 102.⁵⁹² According to one source, a complaint about a police officer's behaviour can also be made by telephone at 102.⁵⁹³ A report can also be filed through the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁵⁹⁴ Since late January 2024, the *E-Polis* app has been available for mobile phones.⁵⁹⁵ A report must then be recorded in writing and signed by the declarant at the police station.⁵⁹⁶ For declarants sixteen years of age or older, the police provide written notification about the liability of individuals who intentionally make false statements. Declarants sign for receipt of this information.⁵⁹⁷ In most cases, declarants receive written confirmation of the report.⁵⁹⁸ According to one source, whether the police take further action depends on the case. For example, if the declarant is a political opponent, a human rights activist or a journalist, if the case involves bribery by the opposing party or if the case involves fraud, there is a good chance that a report will remain outstanding.⁵⁹⁹

The anti-trafficking department has its own hotline. This free 24-hour hotline provides information and advice to victims of trafficking and potential victims, especially women and children.⁶⁰⁰ The anti-corruption department also has its own hotline.⁶⁰¹

⁵⁸⁹ APA, *Investigation on 4 people arrested for FETÖ in Azerbaijan completed, trial begins*, 12 February 2024; AzerNews, *Trial of those arrested for FETO begins in Azerbaijan*, 12 February 2024; BBC Monitoring, *BBCM Azerbaijan watchlist 2 April*, 2 April 2024.

⁵⁹⁰ Confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁹¹ Article 10.III of the Law on Police.

⁵⁹² Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁹³ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁵⁹⁴ Electronic application to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, <https://e-muraciet.mia.gov.az/>, consulted on 15 May 2024; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁹⁵ AzerNews, *Through e-Police mobile app people can get conviction certificate with single click*, 4 February 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁵⁹⁶ AzerNews, *Through e-Police mobile app people can get conviction certificate with single click*, 4 February 2024; confidential source, January 2024.

⁵⁹⁷ Article 2.2 of Decree Number 680 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs dated 3 November 2011.

⁵⁹⁸ Article 2.4 of Decree Number 680 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs dated 3 November 2011; Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan*, 2 July 2020, p. 82; confidential source, January 2024.

⁵⁹⁹ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁶⁰⁰ This hotline is accessible by telephone at 152; USDOL, *2022 findings on the worst forms of child labor*, 26 September 2023, p. 155; UNHCR, *Warning about human trafficking*, <https://help.unhcr.org/azerbaijan/human-trafficking/>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶⁰¹ This hotline is accessible by telephone at 161; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan launches criminal case against officials illegally restricting irrigation water to land users*, 15 August 2022; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan's prosecutor general: 28 people have been arrested for corruption this year*, 25 July 2023.

3.3.2 *Judicial process*

Several sources questioned the independence of the judicial process in Azerbaijan.⁶⁰² According to various sources, judges often worked with the Public Prosecutor's Office, police and State Security Service in politically motivated cases.⁶⁰³ Access to legal aid and lawyers has also been questioned (see below).

3.3.2.1 Access to legal assistance

From a legal perspective, suspects should have access to adequate legal assistance from the moment they are in custody.⁶⁰⁴ Defendants have the right to conduct their own defence, seek legal assistance of their choice or receive free legal assistance from the state.⁶⁰⁵ Legal assistance should be accessible to defendants without restriction throughout the criminal justice process, whilst ensuring privacy and confidentiality.⁶⁰⁶ From a legal perspective, suspects who have applied for legal assistance may not be interrogated until they have received legal assistance, or the interrogation may not be continued without the presence of a lawyer.⁶⁰⁷ In practice, the above was not always the case.⁶⁰⁸ For example, during the reporting period, several reports emerged about suspects who were not given immediate access to a lawyer of their choice after arrest.⁶⁰⁹

3.3.2.2 Human rights lawyers

There has been a shortage of lawyers for some time, especially outside Baku.⁶¹⁰ According to the website of the Bar Association (*Vəkillər Kollegiyası*, hereinafter: Collegium), there were 2,431 members, including 1,976 lawyers in Baku (81%) and 455 outside Baku (19%).⁶¹¹ Only lawyers who were members of the Collegium were allowed to represent their clients in court, unless they were close relatives.⁶¹² According to various sources, few lawyers were willing to take up politically sensitive cases, as they risked having their licences suspended.⁶¹³ In the recent past, the licences of several human rights lawyers had been suspended at least temporarily. Well-known examples included Khalid Baghirov (Xalid Bağirov, 2014), Alayif Hasanov (Əlayif Həsənov, 2015), Yalçın İmanov (2019) and Shahla Humbatova (Şəhla Hübətova, 2021).⁶¹⁴ One well-known human rights lawyer who faced this during the reporting period was Elçin Sadiqov. On 6 July 2023, the Collegium

⁶⁰² The Law Gazette Society, *Lawyers at risk in Azerbaijan, society warns*, 4 April 2023; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 country report Azerbaijan*, 19 March 2024, p. 11; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 12.

⁶⁰³ Freedom House, *Nations in transit 2023, Azerbaijan*, 24 May 2023; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 13; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁰⁴ Article 19.1 and Article 90.7.5 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CCP).

⁶⁰⁵ Article 90.7.7 CCP.

⁶⁰⁶ Article 90.7 CCP.

⁶⁰⁷ Article 19.2 of the Law on Safeguarding the Rights and Freedoms of Detainees.

⁶⁰⁸ Turan, *Elnara Gasimova's lawyer claimed a violation of the confidentiality of her documents*, 2 February 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 10.

⁶⁰⁹ IRFS, *The lawyer is not allowed to meet with a former political emigrant*, 5 November 2021; IRFS, *Lawyer is concerned for his clients' fate*, 6 November 2021; JAMnews, *Opposition activists arrested in Azerbaijan after being deported from Germany*, 21 May 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 8; HRW, *Azerbaijan: Arrest of democracy advocate*, 9 August 2023; Meydan TV, *How Azerbaijan violates the rights of the political imprisoned*, 1 March 2024; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶¹⁰ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 8; BBC Monitoring, *Legal centre established, rights champion on the human rights situation*, 28 September 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶¹¹ Azerbaijani Bar Association, <https://barassociation.az/en>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶¹² Article 9.I of the Law on Lawyers and Legal Practice; Lawyers for Lawyers, *Individual submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review*, 5 April 2023, p. 7.

⁶¹³ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 13; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶¹⁴ ICJ, *Azerbaijan: disbarment of a lawyer undermines independence of the legal profession*, 13 July 2015; IRFS, *Supreme Court dismisses lawyer Alayif Hasanov's appeal*, 7 February 2017; Turan, *IBAHRI calls on Azerbaijan Bar Association to reinstate human rights lawyer immediately*, 23 November 2017; RFE/RL, *Risky business: Defending Azerbaijan's opposition*, 5 February 2018; Turan, *IBAHRI condemns punishment of human rights lawyer by Azerbaijani Bar Association*, 31 December 2019; OC Media, *Azerbaijani rights lawyer Shahla Humbatova disbarred*, 5 March 2021.

suspended his lawyer's licence. On 1 September 2023, the Collegium lifted the suspension following review, after which Sadıqov was able to resume his duties as a lawyer.⁶¹⁵

By law, the Collegium is an independent NGO. According to several sources, however, it is not an independent organisation in practice.⁶¹⁶ According to various sources, lawyers who had been critical of the Collegium or the government were denied access to the oral entrance examination at the Collegium. This oral examination was held after the written examination.⁶¹⁷

3.3.3 *Arrests, custody and detention*

According to the law, crime suspects cannot be detained in police stations for more than 48 hours without a judicial arrest warrant.⁶¹⁸ In practice, the police sometimes detained suspects for more than 48 hours without this order.⁶¹⁹ In addition, suspects would sometimes be incommunicado⁶²⁰ for several hours or days whilst the police held them in pre-trial detention. For example, this was the case for an employee of Abzas Media. He was held incommunicado for more than 48 hours.⁶²¹

The number of prisoners fluctuated between 20,000 and 23,000.⁶²² According to the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan had more than 22,000 prisoners on 31 January 2022.⁶²³ According to various sources, a number of prison complexes dated back to Soviet times. They did not meet modern international standards.⁶²⁴ For example, a number of buildings had moisture problems.⁶²⁵ In several cases, the cells were overcrowded.⁶²⁶ Sanitary conditions were not always good.⁶²⁷ According to one source, there were not enough toilets for the number of prisoners, for example, and

⁶¹⁵ Turan, *Lawyer powers of Elchin Sadıqov suspended*, 7 July 2023; Collegium, *The information of the president of the Azerbaijani Bar Association*, 8 July 2023; Lawyers for Lawyers, *Suspension of the bar license of Mr. Elchin Sadıqov*, 27 July 2023; Turan, *Lawyer activity of Elchin Sadıqov restored*, 1 September 2023; confidential source, May 2024.

⁶¹⁶ Lawyers for Lawyers, *Individual submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review*, 5 April 2023, p. 7; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 country report Azerbaijan*, 19 March 2024, p. 11; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶¹⁷ The Law Gazette Society, *Lawyers at risk in Azerbaijan, society warns*, 4 April 2023; Lawyers for Lawyers, *Individual submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review*, 5 April 2023, p. 8; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶¹⁸ Article 148.6 CCP; Turan, *Those detained in 'Toplum TV' case stated police planted currency and pressured them*, 8 March 2024.

⁶¹⁹ Turan, *The defense requested the transfer of Ramil Babayev to house arrest*, 18 March 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 9.

⁶²⁰ Incommunicado means that a prisoner is detained without access to family or lawyers; Amnesty International, *Detention*, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/detention/>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶²¹ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 international religious freedom report*, 15 May 2023, p. 9; RFE/RL, *Second journalist detained by Baku as rights groups warn of harassment*, 21 November 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶²² Turan, *Reforms in the penitentiary system do not decrease recidivismcrime in Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2022; JAMnews, *Azerbaijan leads in number of prisoners per 100,000 people*, 29 June 2023.

⁶²³ Council of Europe, *SPACE I 2022. Annual penal statistics*, 27 October 2023, p. 31.

⁶²⁴ AzerNews, *President inspects newly-built modern penitentiary institutions in Baku*, 29 March 2022; Turan, *Reforms in the penitentiary system do not decrease recidivismcrime in Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2022; JAMnews, *New prison for life-sentences being built in town outside Baku*, 14 November 2022; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 7; UN, *In dialogue with Azerbaijan, experts of the Committee against Torture welcome human rights training for state officials, ask about reported abuse of Armenian prisoners of war and efforts to improve prison conditions*, 24 April 2024.

⁶²⁵ Turan, *Women journalists from Abzas Media caught a cold in the pre-trial detention center*, 21 March 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶²⁶ Turan, *Mutallim Orudzhev complained about the conditions of detention in the Shuvalan pre-trial detention center*, 2 August 2022; Turan, *Reforms in the penitentiary system do not decrease recidivismcrime in Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 6; Turan, *Arrested activist M. Orujev has health problems*, 26 February 2024; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶²⁷ Confidential source, January 2024.

there were problems with the water supply in the summer.⁶²⁸ The quality of the food was also poor. Several sources qualified the food as inedible.⁶²⁹ Prisoners sometimes had to supplement their diet with food parcels from their relatives.⁶³⁰ Medical care was also inadequate.⁶³¹

During the reporting period, a number of new prison complexes opened. For example, in spring 2022, two penitentiaries for women and juveniles opened in the village of Zabrat near Baku.⁶³² Furthermore, on 17 November 2023, a prison complex for up to 1,300 people opened in the village of Umbakı near Baku.⁶³³ A prison complex in Lankaran for up to 1,300 people also opened in January 2024.⁶³⁴ A prison complex was also under construction in Ganja.⁶³⁵ The exact situation in these prisons is nevertheless unknown.

3.3.4

Maltreatment and torture

The fifth periodic visit of a delegation from the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (*Comité européen pour la prévention de la torture et des peines ou traitements inhumains ou dégradants*, CPT) took place between 11 and 22 December 2020.⁶³⁶ Furthermore, an *ad hoc* visit by the CPT took place between 12 and 19 December 2022.⁶³⁷ At the end of the reporting period, the findings of the CPT had not been published. Azerbaijan opposed publication.⁶³⁸ According to various sources, the situation had not changed much since the CPT reports published in 2018, in which the CPT reported on several cases of torture and serious maltreatment of detainees, amongst other things.⁶³⁹

According to various sources, severe beatings and torture occurred in police stations, detention centres and prisons across the country. This was especially common in police stations, during the initial hours of detention, in order to force a confession of guilt.⁶⁴⁰ Within this context, some sources also mentioned the Main

⁶²⁸ Turan, *Reforms in the penitentiary system do not decrease recidivismcrime in Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶²⁹ Turan, *Reforms in the penitentiary system do not decrease recidivismcrime in Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 7; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶³⁰ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 6; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶³¹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 7; confidential source, January 2024.

⁶³² AzerNews, *President inspects newly-built modern penitentiary institutions in Baku*, 29 March 2022; AzerNews, *National progressive strategy to reform judicial system*, 19 April 2022.

⁶³³ JAMnews, *New prison for life-sentences being built in town outside Baku*, 14 November 2022; Turan, *A penitentiary complex has been put into operation in the village of Umbakı*, 17 November 2023; Turan, *Improving conditions in the new prison will help prevent the return of convicts to the underworld*, 23 November 2023.

⁶³⁴ President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *State-of-the-art penitentiary complex was inaugurated in Lankaran*, 16 January 2024; AZERTAC, *Modern penitentiary complex was inaugurated in Lankaran*, 16 January 2024.

⁶³⁵ Turan, *Reforms in the penitentiary system do not decrease recidivismcrime in Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2022; Turan, *A penitentiary complex has been put into operation in the village of Umbakı*, 17 November 2023.

⁶³⁶ Council of Europe, *Council of Europe anti-torture Committee visits Azerbaijan*, 23 December 2020.

⁶³⁷ Council of Europe, *Council of Europe anti-torture Committee (CPT) carries out a visit to Azerbaijan*, 3 January 2023.

⁶³⁸ Forbidden Stories, *Torture in Azerbaijan: How European funds flow to Baku's prisons*, 1 February 2024; NRC, *Bakoe zet repressie voort ondanks Europese miljoenen*, 2 February 2024; Council of Europe, *The CPT and Azerbaijan*, <https://www.coe.int/nl/web/cpt/azerbaijan>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶³⁹ Le Monde, *En Azerbaïdjan, l'enquête interdite sur des cas de torture dans des prisons bénéficiant de fonds européens*, 1 February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁴⁰ Turan, *Tofiq Yagublu claims police tortured him*, 1 December 2021; RFE/RL, *'I felt I was dying': Azerbaijani activist blames police for violent beating*, 3 December 2021; Amnesty International, *Amnesty International report 2021/22*, 29 March 2022, p. 83; Mikroskop Media, *Religious activist claims to have been raped by Baku police*, 20 June 2022; Turan, *Blogger Rashad Ramazanov claims of torture at police*, 27 May 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, pp. 3-4; HRW, *Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Azerbaijan*, 5 April 2023, p. 2; HRW, *World report 2024, Azerbaijan*, 11 January 2024; OCCRP, *'Total control': Azerbaijan's jails fill with journalists and dissidents as election approaches*, 2 February 2024; OC Media, *Detained Azerbaijani journalist allegedly beaten by police*, 24 April 2024; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

Organised Crime Department (*Baş Mütəşəkkil Cinayətkarlıqla Mübarizə İdarəsi*, BMCMI). In colloquial language, this was known as the *bandotdel*.⁶⁴¹ There were many reports of people having had drugs planted in their clothes and threatening to torture their relatives or to rape them or their female relatives.⁶⁴²

One well-known example was the serious mistreatment of Tofiq Yaqublu, a known member of the Müsavat Party. This took place on 1 December 2021, following his participation in a peaceful protest in central Baku. According to Yaqublu, police wanted to force him to state on camera that he would stop criticising the leadership of Azerbaijan. On 17 January 2022, following an investigation into this event, the Public Prosecutor's Office concluded that Yaqublu had inflicted the injuries on himself.⁶⁴³

Torture is prohibited in the Constitution and the Criminal Code. Assault and torture are punishable by up to eleven years in prison.⁶⁴⁴ According to various sources, no criminal prosecution of police officers for serious ill-treatment or torture took place.⁶⁴⁵ Few prosecutions of other government officials for serious mistreatment or torture took place.⁶⁴⁶ This was done only when there was a lot of fuss and public interest, as evidenced by the Terter case. This case played out from 7 May 2017 within some military units, particularly those stationed in the district of Terter, but also in the district of Şamkir (Şəmkir) and the district of Beyləqan (Beyləqan). On suspicion of spying for Armenian intelligence services, hundreds of military personnel, civilians and their relatives were tortured within a matter of weeks.⁶⁴⁷ At least 25 military personnel were sentenced to prison terms of seven to twenty years for treason in this espionage case (Article 274 CC). According to human rights activists, in most cases their confessions were made following torture.⁶⁴⁸ According to one source, to exert further pressure on them, the fathers and female relatives of

⁶⁴¹ *Bandotdel* is the Russian acronym for the Department for Combating Banditry; Turan, *Religious activists tell about police torture*, 23 May 2022; Turan, *U.S. sanctions Azerbaijani official Kerim Heydar Alimardanov for human rights violations and abuses*, 9 December 2022; Turan, *A new charge against Gubad Ibadoglu?*, 27 February 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 4; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁴² Mikroskop Media, *Azerbaijani oppositionist in prison: 'They stepped on my testicles...'*, 4 February 2022; Forum 18, *Azerbaijan: 'Torture is nothing new, but insulting Allah is crossing a red line'*, 17 June 2022; JAMnews, *Azerbaijani Muslim Unity member claims he was raped by police while in detention*, 21 June 2022; IDP, *The deported individuals from Germany are sentenced to long terms of imprisonment*, 9 December 2022; Nafas LGBTI Azerbaijan Alliance & ECOM, *Joint stakeholders submission to the 44th session of the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review Working Group*, 5 April 2023, p. 15; OC Media, *Opinion: First they came for the Muslims, and we did not speak out...*, 16 May 2023; JAMnews, *Violations of religious freedom in Azerbaijan*, 11 July 2023; Forbidden Stories, *From Azerbaijan to smartphones: How tainted gold ends up in high-tech products*, 1 February 2024; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 5; confidential source, February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁴³ RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani police severely beat opposition politician, activists*, 2 December 2021; RFE/RL, *'I felt I was dying': Azerbaijani activist blames police for violent beating*, 3 December 2021; HRW, *Azerbaijan: Opposition leader beaten in custody. Authorities violently disperse peaceful protest*, 3 December 2021; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijan urged to probe 'horrific' beating of opposition activist in custody*, 4 December 2021; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani opposition politician 'beat himself' in police custody, prosecutor says*, 17 January 2022; Turan, *How Tofiq Yagublu beat himself up*, 17 January 2022; Mikroskop Media, *Azerbaijani police officers: Tofiq Yagublu beat himself up*, 20 January 2022.

⁶⁴⁴ Article 293.3 CC.

⁶⁴⁵ Confidential source, January 2024; confidential source, May 2024.

⁶⁴⁶ HRW, *World report 2024, Azerbaijan*, 11 January 2024; confidential source, November 2023.

⁶⁴⁷ RFE/RL, *Azerbaijani spy scandal leaves trail of dead suspects*, 16 June 2017; Turan, *The Tartar case: blackmail, torture, murder...*, 19 February 2021; BBC Monitoring, *Azeri prosecutor says over 100 servicemen tortured in 2017 espionage case*, 2 November 2021; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani government signals new efforts to address notorious torture care*, 3 January 2022; UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, p. 137; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁴⁸ For additional information on the Terter case, see 3.3.4 of the General Country of Origin Information Report on Azerbaijan of 2 July 2020; Turan, *The Tartar case: blackmail, torture, murder...*, 19 February 2021; IRFS, *Tartar torture report*, May 2022; Turan, *Lawyer Ilham Aslanoglu re-arrested*, 10 June 2022; confidential source, February 2024.

some suspects were also tortured and/or sexually abused.⁶⁴⁹ Some sources reported that, in the Terter case, at least nine military personnel in pre-trial detention had died as a result of torture.⁶⁵⁰ According to other sources, at least eleven military personnel and, possibly, many more were involved.⁶⁵¹

On 16 December 2021, under pressure from all the publicity and commotion about the Terter case, the prosecution decided to reopen the investigation.⁶⁵² Government information from 2022 showed that a total of 452 victims of torture and other illegal actions had been identified.⁶⁵³ According to various sources, there had been at least 500 to possibly more than 1,000 victims.⁶⁵⁴ On 6 December 2022, the Public Prosecutor's Office reported that nineteen individuals had been released. Ten of them were acquitted, and the cases of nine had been closed without an acquittal.⁶⁵⁵ In May 2023, five individuals were granted amnesty and one was acquitted.⁶⁵⁶ According to various sources, seven to ten people remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.⁶⁵⁷

On 10 February 2022, the prosecution stated that four military personnel had been arrested on charges of torture.⁶⁵⁸ According to one source, this number had risen to eighteen military personnel in 2024.⁶⁵⁹ According to various sources, many more individuals were responsible for the crimes committed in the Terter case.⁶⁶⁰ On 29 November 2023, a military court in Baku sentenced four military personnel to prison terms of 5.5 to 9.5 years under various provisions, including Article 145.3 CC (illegal deprivation of liberty resulting in death), Article 293.3 CC (torture) and Article 341.2.2 CC (abuse of power using a weapon).⁶⁶¹ On 28 December 2023, this court

⁶⁴⁹ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁵⁰ Turan, *The Tartar case: blackmail, torture, murder...*, 19 February 2021; Mikroskop Media, *New arrests, search warrant on Azerbaijan's notorious 'Tartar case'*, 21 April 2022; Turan, *The acquitted in the 'Terter case' banned from communicating with the press*, 18 January 2023; Turan, *Sentence passed on accused in torture of 'Terter case' defendants*, 29 November 2023; NRC, *Bakoe zet repressie voort ondanks Europese miljoenen*, 2 February 2024.

⁶⁵¹ UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, p. 137; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁵² Turan, *New investigation in the 'Terter case'? Who will be in the dock?*, 17 December 2021; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani government signals new efforts to address notorious torture case*, 3 January 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan: Light slowly being shed on notorious torture case*, 2 March 2022; Turan, *They are trying to silence those who talk about the 'Terter case'*, 28 June 2022; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 2; Turan, *10 defendants in 'Terter case' are still in prison – human rights activist*, 8 December 2023.

⁶⁵³ APA, *405 victims in connection with 'Terter case' determined*, 5 September 2022; AzerNews, *Azerbaijan arrests army general over notorious 'Tartar case'*, 5 September 2022.

⁶⁵⁴ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 6; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁵⁵ Turan, *The 'Terter case': 19 people – released, 2 dead soldiers – acquitted. Has justice prevailed?*, 6 December 2022; Turan, *The victims of the 'Terter case' demand the appearance in court of the highest military ranks*, 5 April 2023.

⁶⁵⁶ Turan, *Another person involved in the 'Terter case' was acquitted*, 31 May 2023; HRW, *World report 2024, Azerbaijan*, 11 January 2024.

⁶⁵⁷ Turan, *10 defendants in 'Terter case' are still in prison – human rights activist*, 8 December 2023; Turan, *Another group of persons accused of committing torture in the 'Terter case' has been convicted*, 28 December 2023; UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, p. 135; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁵⁸ On 19 April 2022, the Public Prosecutor's Office declared that it had indicted seven military personnel for charges including torture. Six of them had been arrested, and one person had been placed on the wanted list. On 5 September 2022, the Public Prosecutor's Office stated that it had arrested three military personnel; BBC Monitoring, *Four arrested in Azeri army torture case*, 10 February 2022; Turan, *The prosecutor's office arrested a group of military men guilty of torture in the Terter case*, 19 April 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Seven Azeri soldiers indicted over army torture case*, 19 April 2022; Turan, *The arrest of the general in the 'Terter case'. Is it really the turn of the army elite?*, 6 September 2022; BBC Monitoring, *Three more arrests in Azeri army torture case*, 9 September 2022.

⁶⁵⁹ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁶⁰ Turan, *The victims of the 'Terter case' demand the appearance in court of the highest military ranks*, 5 April 2023; Turan, *10 defendants in 'Terter case' are still in prison – human rights activist*, 8 December 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁶¹ Turan, *Sentence passed on accused in torture of 'Terter case' defendants*, 29 November 2023.

sentenced five other military personnel, including a major general, to prison terms of 6.5 to 9.5 years under various provisions, including Section 293.3 CC.⁶⁶²

⁶⁶² BBC Monitoring, *Azerbaijan jails five men in army torture case*, 28 December 2023; Turan, *Another group of persons accused of committing torture in the 'Terter case' has been convicted*, 28 December 2023.

4 Refugees and displaced persons

4.1 Internally displaced persons

According to information from the State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (*Qaçqınların və Məcburi Köçkünlərin İşləri üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi*) of November 2023, there were 658,793 internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan (approximately 6.5% of the population).⁶⁶³ Most of these were Azerbaijanis who had been displaced between 1988 and 1994, and their descendants. At the time, they were from the Karabakh region and nearby districts.⁶⁶⁴ Since the 1990s, internally displaced persons have lived scattered throughout the country, but particularly in and around the cities of Baku and Sumqayıt.⁶⁶⁵

4.1.1 Position of internally displaced persons

The State Committee was concerned with registering internally displaced persons, allocating housing to them and providing support to them. Internally displaced persons enjoyed a variety of privileges, including a monthly financial contribution from the government, exemption from tuition fees, free textbooks and certain tax exemptions.⁶⁶⁶ Despite support from the government and international organisations, a significant proportion of internally displaced persons lived in poverty. The unemployment rate amongst displaced persons was higher than the national average.⁶⁶⁷ A substantial proportion of them were living in special housing developments for displaced persons, which had been set up by the government based on their original area of residence. Most were living in apartment complexes in these areas. A smaller proportion of them were living in shelters that were less suitable for permanent residence (e.g. such as dormitories with shared sanitary facilities).⁶⁶⁸

4.1.2 Return to the original areas of residence

In 2020, the Azerbaijani army captured part of the Karabakh region and seven nearby districts. On 16 November 2022, President Aliyev signed Decree Number 3587, thereby approving the State Programme for the Great Return to the Liberated Territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan (*Azərbaycan Respublikasının işğaldan azad*

⁶⁶³ JIPS, *Strengthening the data systems and capacities of the IDP committee in Azerbaijan*, 30 November 2023; UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, 29 February 2024, p. 1.

⁶⁶⁴ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 31; IOM, *Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A country profile 2013-2021*, 6 October 2023, p. 71; JIPS, *Strengthening the data systems and capacities of the IDP committee in Azerbaijan*, 30 November 2023.

⁶⁶⁵ Jennifer S. Wistrand, A development approach to a protracted IDP situation: Lessons from Azerbaijan, *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, March 2023; IOM, *Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A country profile 2013-2021*, 6 October 2023, p. 73.

⁶⁶⁶ Amnesty International, 'Life in a box': Older people's experiences of displacement and prospects for return in Azerbaijan, 17 May 2022, pp. 6 and 18; The World Bank, *Internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan: Livelihoods, services and intentions*, 1 April 2023, pp. 6 and 10; CESCR, *Information received from Azerbaijan on follow-up to the concluding observations on its fourth periodic report (E/C.12/AZE/FCO/4)*, 7 February 2024, p. 4; State Committee for Affairs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons of the Republic of Azerbaijan, *Privileges*, <https://idp.gov.az/en/content/7/parent/21>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶⁶⁷ The World Bank, *Internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan*, 1 April 2023, p. 26; UNGA, *Azerbaijan (A/HRC/WG.6/44/AZE/2)*, 31 August 2023, p. 10; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2023 human rights report*, 23 April 2024, p. 40.

⁶⁶⁸ Amnesty International, 'Life in a box', 17 May 2022, pp. 6, 20 and 21; The World Bank, *Internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan*, 1 April 2023, p. 17; Freedom House, *Freedom in the world 2024, Azerbaijan*, 29 February 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

edilmiş ərazilərinə Böyük Qayıdışa dair I Dövlət Proqramı). This state programme covered the reconstruction of parts of the Karabakh region and nearby districts to enable the resettlement of internally displaced persons. One component of this programme was the concept of smart cities and smart villages.⁶⁶⁹ It was envisaged that more than 140,000 people would have returned by the end of 2026.⁶⁷⁰ Factors that complicated the return process included unclear border demarcations, large numbers of landmines left behind, lack of infrastructure and lack of employment opportunities.⁶⁷¹

The return to the Karabakh region and nearby districts got underway during the reporting period.⁶⁷² In early February 2024, the State Committee stated that 5,354 former internally displaced persons had returned as of 30 January 2024.⁶⁷³ The return was largely limited to the cities of Laçın and Füzuli and a few villages, including Ağalı in the district of Zangilan (Zəngilan), Talış in the district of Terter and Zabukh (Zabux) in the district of Laçın.⁶⁷⁴

4.2 Refugees and asylum seekers

4.2.1 Human rights conventions

Azerbaijan is party to the following relevant human rights conventions relating to refugees and refoulement:

- European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) of 1950 (ratified on 15 April 2002);
- Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Refugee Convention) of 1951 (entered on 12 February 1993);
- Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons of 1954 (entered on 16 August 1996);
- Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness of 1961 (entered on 16 August 1996);
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (IVBPR) of 1966 (entered on 13 August 1992);
- Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1967 (entered on 12 February 1993);
- Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) of 1984 (entered on 16 August 1996);

⁶⁶⁹ These concepts presuppose a modern, highly digitised living environment, including access to high-speed internet and green technology; AzerNews, *Zangilan's Aghali village natives on border with Armenia back to lusted-after homes in nearly 30 years*, 19 July 2022; RFE/RL, *Azerbaijanis visit new 'smart village' in land recaptured from Armenia*, 20 July 2022; The World Bank, *Internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan*, 1 April 2023, p. 10; AzerNews, *New residents of Azerbaijan's Aghali enjoy snowy view in village*, 15 January 2024.

⁶⁷⁰ BBC Monitoring, *Azeri ambassador on prospects for peace with Armenia*, 4 January 2024; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, *Rückkehr aus Baku*, 9 February 2024.

⁶⁷¹ The World Bank, *Internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan*, 1 April 2023, p. 11; AP News, *Azerbaijanis who fled a separatist region decades ago ache to return, but it could be a long wait*, 15 October 2023; Council of Europe, *Observations on the human rights situation of people affected by the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region*, 12 January 2024, p. 10; APA, *Assistant to president: landmines, explosive remnants of war prevent IDPs from returning*, 4 April 2024.

⁶⁷² VOA, *Azerbaijan starts return of people to recaptured areas*, 19 July 2022.

⁶⁷³ AzerNews, *Total number of IDPs relocated to territories freed from invasion revealed*, 5 February 2024; Caspian News, *Azerbaijan's 'Great return' relocates 1,360 families to their liberated native lands*, 6 February 2024.

⁶⁷⁴ APA, *Azerbaijan relocates 25 more families to Zabukh village*, 20 November 2023; Trend, *More former IDP families arrive in Azerbaijan's liberated Fuzuli city*, 18 December 2023; AzerNews, *New residents of Azerbaijan's Aghali enjoy snowy view in village*, 15 January 2024; Caspian News, *125 IDPs resettle in Fuzuli under "Great return" program*, 25 January 2024; Süddeutsche Zeitung, *Unsere Geisterstadt soll schöner werden*, 4 February 2024; Trouw, *Met Vadertje Staat naar de bevrijde gebieden in Azerbeidzjan*, 13 February 2024; AZERTAC, *24 more families relocated to Lachin city get house keys*, 28 February 2024; APA, *Azerbaijan relocates 153 more residents to Fuzuli city*, 29 April 2024.

- Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT-OP) on 2002 (ratified on 28 January 2009).⁶⁷⁵

4.2.2

Asylum seekers

Asylum seekers could apply for asylum at the State Migration Service and qualify for refugee status.⁶⁷⁶ National legislation did not provide for any form of subsidiary protection or status on humanitarian grounds.⁶⁷⁷ According to information from the State Migration Service, an interview on the reason for the asylum application was held within fifteen days of registration. As part of this interview, asylum seekers would sign the application form. After the interview, asylum seekers received a temporary certificate granting them right of residence. This certificate was valid throughout the asylum procedure, including during the appeal stages in the national courts.⁶⁷⁸ According to the State Migration Service, decisions on asylum applications would be taken within three months of registering the application.⁶⁷⁹ In the event of a rejection, an asylum seeker would have ten days after receiving this notice to leave the country. An asylum seeker could appeal the rejection to the Baku Administrative Court within thirty days of receiving it. It was possible to proceed in second instance to the Appeal Court and, in third instance, to the Supreme Court.⁶⁸⁰

According to UNHCR, there were 121 asylum seekers in Azerbaijan in mid-2022, including 41 from Ukraine, 35 from Afghanistan and 34 from Pakistan.⁶⁸¹ In mid-2023, there were 159 asylum seekers in Azerbaijan, including 108 from Ukraine, 31 from Pakistan and 15 from Afghanistan.⁶⁸²

There is no evidence that Azerbaijan restricted opportunities to apply for asylum during the reporting period.⁶⁸³

4.2.3

Refugees

At the end of 2022, a total of 76 individuals had been recognised as refugees by the Azerbaijani authorities.⁶⁸⁴ Recognised refugees had access to the labour market, education and healthcare.⁶⁸⁵ They were also eligible for travel documents. Some families received financial support from the UNHCR. The UNHCR also paid tuition fees for some refugees.⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁷⁵ Treaty Database, www.verdragenbank.overheid.nl/en.

⁶⁷⁶ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 30; IOM, *Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A country profile 2013-2021*, 6 October 2023, p. 35; Azerbaycan 24, *Protester from Tabriz seeks asylum in Azerbaijan*, 16 October 2023; UNHCR, *How to apply for asylum in Azerbaijan*, <https://help.unhcr.org/azerbaijan/how-to-apply-for-asylum-in-azerbaijan/apply/>, consulted on 15 May 2024; UNHCR, *What can be the decision in my case?*, <https://help.unhcr.org/azerbaijan/how-to-apply-for-asylum-in-azerbaijan/decision-and-appeal/>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶⁷⁷ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2022 human rights report*, 20 March 2023, p. 30; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 24; IOM, *Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A country profile 2013-2021*, 6 October 2023, p. 35.

⁶⁷⁸ UNHCR, *How to apply for asylum in Azerbaijan*.

⁶⁷⁹ State Migration Service, *Refugee status*, <https://migration.gov.az/en/page/76>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶⁸⁰ IOM, *Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A country profile 2013-2021*, 6 October 2023, p. 35; UNHCR, *What can be the decision in my case?*

⁶⁸¹ UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, February 2023.

⁶⁸² UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, 29 February 2024, p. 1.

⁶⁸³ USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2021 human rights report*, 12 April 2022, p. 33.

⁶⁸⁴ CRC, *Replies of Azerbaijan to the list of issues in relation to its combined fifth and sixth reports (CRC/C/AZE/RQ/5-6)*, 26 May 2022, p. 25; UNGA, *Azerbaijan (A/HRC/WG.6/44/AZE/2)*, 31 August 2023, p. 9.

⁶⁸⁵ Meydan TV, *'They're not even human'*, 22 October 2021; UN Azerbaijan, *UNHCR continues promoting refugee education in Azerbaijan with the support of the United States and other donors*, 21 September 2022; ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 25; UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, 30 September 2023.

⁶⁸⁶ UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, 30 September 2023.

Until 1 July 2020, asylum seekers who had been rejected had the option of applying to the UNHCR for asylum. Refugees recognised by the UNHCR had access to the labour market, education and healthcare.⁶⁸⁷ Asylum seekers who had registered with the UNHCR before 1 July 2020 received a letter from the UNHCR protecting them from refoulement.⁶⁸⁸ At the end of 2022, 1,592 individuals were under the mandate of the UNHCR.⁶⁸⁹

According to the UNHCR, there were 1,694 refugees in Azerbaijan on 31 December 2021, including 1,189 from Afghanistan, 317 from the Russian Federation and 69 from Iran.⁶⁹⁰ According to information from Azerbaijani authorities, 16,418 Ukrainians arrived in Azerbaijan between February and December 2022.⁶⁹¹ Ukrainians who did not wish to apply for asylum but who did wish to receive support from the UNHCR could register with the UNHCR.⁶⁹² As of 30 June 2022, the number of refugees and UNHCR-registered Ukrainians had increased to 6,466, including 4,788 from Ukraine, 1,179 from Afghanistan and 325 from the Russian Federation.⁶⁹³ In mid-2023, there were 6,280 refugees in Azerbaijan, including 4,668 from Ukraine, 1,126 from Afghanistan and 303 from the Russian Federation.⁶⁹⁴

⁶⁸⁷ CESCR, *Information received from Azerbaijan*, 7 February 2024, p. 3.

⁶⁸⁸ Refoulement refers to the forced return of asylum seekers to the country of origin, where there is a real risk of persecution or serious harm; USDOS, *Azerbaijan 2021 human rights report*, 12 April 2022, p. 33; IOM, *Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A country profile 2013-2021*, 6 October 2023, p. 35.

⁶⁸⁹ UNGA, *Azerbaijan (A/HRC/WG.6/44/AZE/2)*, 31 August 2023, p. 9.

⁶⁹⁰ UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, February 2022.

⁶⁹¹ ECRI, *ECRI report on Azerbaijan*, 21 June 2023, p. 24.

⁶⁹² UNHCR Azerbaijan, *Information for people fleeing Ukraine*, <https://help.unhcr.org/azerbaijan/people-fleeing-ukraine/>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶⁹³ UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, September 2022.

⁶⁹⁴ UNHCR, *Azerbaijan fact sheet*, 29 February 2024, p. 1.

5 Return

Within the European Union, Germany was the primary destination country for migrants from Azerbaijan.⁶⁹⁵ In 2022, the five main destination countries for asylum seekers from Azerbaijan were Germany, France, the United States, Sweden and the Netherlands, respectively.⁶⁹⁶ During the reporting period, multiple Azerbaijanis returned to Azerbaijan from the European Union.⁶⁹⁷

5.1 Voluntary return

In Azerbaijan, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) provides support to returnees within the framework of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, AVRR). This support could include helping to set up income-generating activities (e.g. providing support to start a small business, buying a car to act as a taxi or purchasing livestock). It may also include medical support or material assistance in the form of household appliances and furniture.⁶⁹⁸

From January 2023 to September 2023, a total of 1,367 Azerbaijani nationals voluntarily returned to Azerbaijan through the AVRR projects. These voluntary returns took place from Moldova (1,149 people), Germany (170 people), the Netherlands (24 people), Austria (11 people), Latvia (1 person), Georgia (1 person), Belarus (1 person), Hungary (1 person), Poland (1 person), Türkiye (1 person) and Romania (1 person).⁶⁹⁹

From the Netherlands, 41 people voluntarily returned to Azerbaijan in 2021 with assistance from the IOM. In 2022 it was 66 people, in 2023 it was 49 people and, in the period from January to April 2024, it was 22 people.⁷⁰⁰

5.2 Forced return from the European Union

On 30 April 2014, Azerbaijan and the European Union signed the Agreement on readmission of individuals residing in the territory without authorisation. It entered into force on 1 September 2014.⁷⁰¹ Deportations followed, particularly from Germany.⁷⁰² According to the Azerbaijan State Migration Service, 2,063 Azerbaijani nationals were deported to Azerbaijan between 2014 and 2021, including 1,722 persons (83.5%) from Germany, 195 individuals (9.5%) from Sweden and 39

⁶⁹⁵ Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *A portrait of a migrant: Azerbaijanis in Germany*, 12 January 2022; IOM, *Migration in the Republic of Azerbaijan: A country profile 2013-2021*, 6 October 2023, p. 46.

⁶⁹⁶ Worlddata.info, *Asylum applications and refugees from Azerbaijan*, <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/azerbaijan/asylum.php>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁶⁹⁷ Report, *Number of citizens who voluntarily returned to Azerbaijan from Europe revealed*, 3 October 2023.

⁶⁹⁸ Confidential source, February 2024.

⁶⁹⁹ IOM Azerbaijan, *IOM Azerbaijan provided cash and in-kind reintegration assistance to 293 returnees during the first 9 months of 2023*, 30 September 2023; Report, *Number of citizens who voluntarily returned to Azerbaijan from Europe revealed*, 3 October 2023.

⁷⁰⁰ IOM Nederland, *Monthly Statistics Voluntary Return 2008 - Today*, <https://iom-nederland.nl/en/statistics/monthly-statistics-voluntary-return-2008-today>, consulted on 15 May 2024.

⁷⁰¹ EUR-Lex, *Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Azerbaijan on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation*, 30 April 2014.

⁷⁰² Turan, *Forty two Azerbaijanis deported from European countries*, 16 February 2022; Report, *Another group of Azerbaijanis deported from Germany*, 29 March 2022; Mikroskop Media, *Return flight to dictatorship: Germany departs opposition members, Azerbaijan imprisons them*, 28 October 2022; DMX, *Information of the public relations department of the State Migration Service*, 30 August 2023.

individuals (1.9%) from the Netherlands.⁷⁰³ In 2021, 505 individuals returned after receiving a return decision.⁷⁰⁴

5.3 Problems after return

During the reporting period, several individuals encountered problems with the authorities after returning to Azerbaijan.⁷⁰⁵ Well-known examples included the politician Qubad Ibadoğlu (see 3.1.3.4) and the editor-in-chief of Abzas Media, Sevinc Vaqifqızı (see 3.2.1.5).

According to various sources, at least seven people faced interrogation, arrest and criminal charges after their forced deportation to Azerbaijan from Germany. According to these sources, they had participated in protest actions in Germany.⁷⁰⁶ According to several sources, the authorities questioned them upon entering the country about their contacts and activities in Germany.⁷⁰⁷ Until the special quarantine rules due to COVID-19 were lifted in March 2022, people deported to Azerbaijan first had to spend time in a quarantine facility in the Athletes' Village near Baku.⁷⁰⁸ There, people were questioned about their activities in Germany.⁷⁰⁹ According to one source, those returning to Azerbaijan after March 2022 were questioned at the airport.⁷¹⁰ The following are several examples of individuals who experienced problems on the part of the authorities after returning from Germany. This list is by no means exhaustive.

On 1 June 2021, Germany deported a member of the Popular Front Party. Authorities arrested him on 23 October 2021 in the city of Quba. This was followed by charges of large-scale drug trafficking. According to the Popular Front Party, his arrest was politically motivated. On 21 October 2022, the Sumqayit Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to seven years in prison for large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC).⁷¹¹

⁷⁰³ Eurasianet, *Azerbaijani activists being arrested after deportation from Germany*, 5 May 2022; Global Voices, *Unable to emigrate and not welcome at home: The Azerbaijani political refugees in limbo*, 25 August 2022.

⁷⁰⁴ European Commission, *Report from the commission to the council. Assessment of third countries' level of cooperation on readmission in 2021*, 8 December 2022, p. 22.

⁷⁰⁵ Mikroskop Media, *Azerbaijani political activist arrested after being deported from Germany*, 21 April 2022; JAMnews, *Wife of political emigrant arrested in Azerbaijan banned from leaving country*, 26 August 2022; Turan, *NCDF condemns criminal prosecution of Gultekin Hajibayli*, 19 December 2022; Blankspot, *The persecution of the exiled*, 5 November 2023; AIW, *Blogger gets questioned at the ministry of the interior*, 4 December 2023; Turan, *Social network user Elshan Kerimov detained in Yevlakh region of Azerbaijan*, 18 April 2024; confidential source, February 2024.

⁷⁰⁶ Turan, *The lawyer is not allowed to meet with a former political emigrant*, 5 November 2021; Global Voices, *Unable to emigrate and not welcome at home: The Azerbaijani political refugees in limbo*, 25 August 2022; Mikroskop Media, *Return flight to dictatorship: Germany deports opposition members, Azerbaijan imprisons them*, 28 October 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan imprisons another activist deported from Germany*, 18 January 2023; Turan, *DAS demands the release of Emin Malikov and other political prisoners*, 16 June 2023; Meydan TV, *Action in Berlin: 'Let's stand in solidarity for the freedom of political prisoners arrested in Azerbaijan'*, 20 June 2023; Blankspot, *The persecution of the exiled*, 5 November 2023; IPD, *List of political prisoners*, 1 December 2023; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, February 2024.

⁷⁰⁷ Turan, *PFFA activist Mutallim Orudzhev arrested*, 27 October 2021; Meydan TV, *Europe at all costs: The pitfalls of pursuing a better life abroad*, 29 October 2021; confidential source, October 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

⁷⁰⁸ JAMnews, *Relatives of deported Azerbaijani political prisoners protest in front of German embassy in Baku*, 31 May 2022; confidential source, January 2024.

⁷⁰⁹ JAMnews, *Opposition activists arrested in Azerbaijan after being deported from Germany*, 21 May 2022; IPD, *Being deported from Germany they are almost immediately jailed in Azerbaijan*, 20 February 2023; UFFPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, p. 39; confidential source, November 2023.

⁷¹⁰ Confidential source, January 2024.

⁷¹¹ Turan, *PFFA activist Mutallim Orudzhev arrested*, 27 October 2021; Turan, *The Court of Appeal leaves Mutallim Orudzhev in custody*, 3 November 2021; IPD, *An opposition activist deported from Germany to Azerbaijan has been arrested*, 4 November 2021; Turan, *Trial of PFFA members Mutallim Orudzhev to be held behind closed doors*, 2 June 2022; IDP, *The deported individuals from Germany are sentenced to long terms of imprisonment*,

Furthermore, Germany deported a member of the Müsavat Party on 1 June 2021. Authorities arrested him on 25 October 2021 near Sumqayıt. According to him, drugs had been planted on his person, and he had been forced to make a confession. On September 28, 2022, the Sumqayıt Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to seven years in prison for large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC).⁷¹²

On 24 November 2021, Germany deported a member of the Popular Front Party. Authorities arrested him on 25 January 2022 in Baku. According to his relatives, drugs had been planted on his person and he had been threatened with torture if he did not sign a confession. On 27 July 2022, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to six years in prison for drug trafficking in association (Article 234.4.1 CC) and large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC). On appeal, the sentence was reduced to five years.⁷¹³

On 25 November 2021, Germany deported a member of the organisation Elect a Democratic Azerbaijan (*Demokratik Azərbaycanı Seç, DAS*), which is active in Germany. Authorities arrested him on 27 January 2022 in Baku. According to him, police officers had planted the drugs on his person. On 16 January 2023, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to six years in prison for large-scale drug trafficking (Article 234.4.3 CC). On appeal, the sentence was reduced to five years.⁷¹⁴

On 29 March 2022, Germany deported an activist who had been a member of opposition party ReAl until 2020. Authorities arrested him on 19 April 2022 for allegedly stabbing someone. According to him, it was staged, and the police had planted a knife in his coat pocket. On 18 December 2023, the Baku Serious Crimes Court sentenced him to 6.5 years in prison on charges of deliberately inflicting grievous bodily harm with a knife (Article 126.2.4 CC) and hooliganism (Article 221.3 CC). On 15 February 2024, the court upheld this conviction on appeal.⁷¹⁵

9 December 2022; Blankspot, *The persecution of the exiled*, 5 November 2023; UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, pp. 37-38.

⁷¹² Turan, *The lawyer is not allowed to meet with a former political emigrant*, 5 November 2021; IRFS, *Lawyer is concerned for his clients' fate*, 6 November 2021; IRFS, *Activist deported from Germany accused of drug trafficking and tortured by police*, 12 November 2021; Turan, *Activist deported from Germany sentenced to seven years*, 28 September 2022; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan imprisons another activist deported from Germany*, 18 January 2023; IPD, *Yet, another political activist is deported from Germany and convicted*, 1 March 2023; Blankspot, *The persecution of the exiled*, 5 November 2023; UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, p. 38; confidential source, November 2023; confidential source, January 2024.

⁷¹³ Meydan TV, *Returning migrants: deported from Germany face arrests on drug charges*, 2 February 2022; IRFS, *Another activist expelled from Germany arrested*, 2 February 2022; IRFS, *German expelled activist not released under house arrest*, 15 February 2022; JAMnews, *Opposition activists arrested in Azerbaijan after being deported from Germany*, 21 May 2022; Faxt Yoxla, MP: *'Our compatriots who returned from Germany are not persecuted'*, 22 May 2022; JAMnews, *Another Azerbaijani deported from Germany sentenced to imprisonment*, 27 July 2022; Turan, *Appeal filed against verdict on Pyunkhan Kerimli*, 12 August 2022; IPD, *They are deported from Germany and arrested in Azerbaijan*, 11 September 2022; Turan, *Supreme court to consider appeal of opposition activist deported from Germany*, 28 April 2023; Turan, *Consideration of the appeal of Punhan Kerimli has begun*, 1 August 2023; Blankspot, *The persecution of the exiled*, 5 November 2023; UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, p. 39.

⁷¹⁴ Turan, *Deported from Germany Jafar Mirzoyev, deported from Germany, is detained*, 28 January 2022; IRFS, *Activist extradited from Germany sentenced to 6 years*, 16 January 2023; AzerNews, *Court sentences PFAP member to 6 years in prison*, 17 January 2023; OC Media, *Azerbaijan sentences opposition activist to 6 years after he was denied asylum in Germany*, 17 January 2023; JAMnews, *Oppositionist deported from Germany convicted in Azerbaijan*, 17 January 2023; Eurasianet, *Azerbaijan imprisons another activist deported from Germany*, 18 January 2023; IPD, *Being deported from Germany they are almost immediately jailed in Azerbaijan*, 20 February 2023; IRFS, *Consideration of the appeal of the oppositionist deported from Germany*, 9 March 2023; Turan, *The Supreme Court did not release the activist deported from Germany*, 10 January 2024; UFPPA, *List of political prisoners*, 18 March 2024, p. 39.

⁷¹⁵ OC Media, *Activist arrested in Azerbaijan following deportation from Germany*, 21 April 2022; VOA, *Azeri asylum-seekers face charges after repatriation from Germany*, 22 April 2022; Turan, *Azerbaijani political emigrants held a protest action in Berlin*, 22 April 2022; Caucasian Knot, *Rights defenders and Samir Ashurov's wife treat his*

Furthermore, Germany deported a member of the Popular Front Party on 19 May 2022. Authorities arrested him upon arrival at Baku airport. According to a statement from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, he had been wanted since 2019 for failing to pay alimony to his ex-wife. This was followed by a charge under Article 306.1 CC for failing to pay for a flat. On 24 November 2022, a Bilasuvar (Biləsuvar) district court ordered the release of this individual, saying that he had since paid.⁷¹⁶

5.4 Return of unaccompanied minors

During the reporting period, dozens of children without parents from Syria and Iraq were returned to Azerbaijan.⁷¹⁷ The regulations for the return and rehabilitation of minor citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan found abroad unaccompanied by their parents or other legal representatives and living in difficult conditions abroad were adopted on 28 October 2023.⁷¹⁸ According to this arrangement, a two-month rehabilitation period is to follow return to Azerbaijan. During this period, these children are placed in one of the institutions of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population.⁷¹⁹ In these two months, the ministry draws up individual plans for return.⁷²⁰ Thereafter, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population takes a decision on placement.⁷²¹

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⁷²⁰ Article 3.2 of the presidential decree of 28 October 2023.

⁷²¹ Article 3.6 of the presidential decree of 28 October 2023.

6 Appendices

6.1 List of abbreviations used

ADR	Azerbaijani Party of Democracy and Prosperity (<i>Azərbaycan Demokratiya və Rifah Partiyası</i>)
AİP	Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (<i>Azərbaycan İslam Partiyası</i>)
APA	Azerbaijani Press Agency
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
AXCP	Popular Front Party (<i>Azərbaycan Xalq Cəbhəsi Partiyası</i>)
BMCMİ	Main Organised Crime Department (<i>Baş Mütəşəkkil Cinayətkarlıqla Mübarizə İdarəsi</i>)
CAT	Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CAT-OP	Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CPT	European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (<i>Comité européen pour la prévention de la torture et des peines ou traitements inhumains ou dégradants</i>)
DAS	Elect a Democratic Azerbaijan (<i>Demokratik Azərbaycanı Seç</i>)
DMX	State Migration Service (<i>Dövlət Miqrasiya Xidməti</i>)
DQİDK	State Committee on Religious Associations (<i>Dini Qurumlarla İş üzrə Dövlət Komitəsi</i>)
DQMŞ	National Council of Democratic Forces (<i>Demokratik Qüvvələrin Milli Şurası</i>)
DSK	State Statistics Committee (<i>Dövlət Statistika Komitəsi</i>)
DTX	State Security Service (<i>Dövlət Təhlükəsizliyi Xidməti</i>)
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
FETÖ	Fethullah's Terror Organisation (<i>Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü</i>)
ICJ	United Nations International Court of Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDI	Institute for Democratic Initiatives (<i>Demokratik Təşəbbüslər İnstitutu</i>)
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other diverse identities
MBH	Muslim Unity Movement (<i>Müselman Birliyi Hərəkatı</i>)
MİA	Media Development Agency (<i>Medianın İnkişafı Agentliyi</i>)
MİT	Turkish Security Service (<i>Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı</i>)
Müsavat AKM	Müsavat Europe Coordination Centre (<i>Müsavat Avropa Koordinasiya Mərkəzi</i>)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OCCRP	Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
QMİ	Bureau for Caucasian Muslims (<i>Qafqaz Müsəlmanları İdaresi</i>)
ReAl	Republican Alternative Party (<i>Respublikaçı Alternativ Partiyası</i>)
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
RSF	Reporters Without Borders (<i>Reporters sans frontières</i>)
SHXÇDX	State Service for Mobilisation and Conscription (<i>Səfərbərlik və Hərbi Xidmətə Çağırış üzrə Dövlət Xidməti</i>)

SMDT	Educational Centre for Election Monitoring and Democracy (<i>Seçkilərin Monitorinqi və Demokratiyanın Tədrisi Mərkəzi</i>)
SOCAR	State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic
SXA	Social Services Agency (<i>Sosial Xidmətlər Agentliyi</i>)
CCP	Code of Criminal Procedure
UFPPA	Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VHP	Civic Solidarity Party (<i>Vətəndaş Həmrəyliyi Partiyası</i>)
CoAO	Code of Administrative Offences
CC	Criminal Code
YAP	New Azerbaijan Party (<i>Yeni Azərbaycan Partiyası</i>)

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Azərbaycan 24	OC Media
Azeri Daily	Politico
AzerNews	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)
AZERTAC	Report
BBC Monitoring	Reuters
BBC News	Süddeutsche Zeitung
BBC News Russian	The Guardian
Caspian News	The Independent
Caucasian Knot	Time
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