

No More Election Observation in Azerbaijan – And the EU is Partly to Blame

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EPDE demands immediate and unconditional release of Anar Mammadli as politically motivated trial set to start on 7 July 2025.

On 7 July 2025, the Baku criminal court will begin the main hearings in the trial of our colleague Anar Mammadli, co-founder of the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), director of Azerbaijan's only remaining independent election observation organization Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS), and Václav Havel Human Rights Prize laureate.

Anar is facing trial on fabricated charges that could lead to a prison sentence of up to 12 years. His trial marks a critical moment in the complete dismantling of independent election monitoring in Azerbaijan – a crisis that EU and Council of Europe's inaction has helped accelerate.

Anar Mammadli has been detained since April 29, 2024, on smuggling and money laundering charges that were recently aggravated with additional charges of "illegal entrepreneurial activities", "tax evasion", and "document forgery". His constantly deteriorating health condition requires immediate medical attention. This is the second time Anar is being imprisoned on fabricated charges. The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2018 that his 2014 detention violated the Convention (Articles 5 and 18). Six years later, that judgment remains unimplemented.

Aliyev's Systematic Destruction of Democracy

The targeting of Mammadli represents the final blow to independent domestic election observation in Azerbaijan. Mammadli's renewed detention is not an isolated case, but part of a decade-long strategy of systemic repression using the judiciary as a tool of retaliation: many NGO figures worked for and / or affiliated to EMDS are now political prisoners, joining 375 other political prisoners including human rights defenders, journalists, intellectuals, and opposition figures incarcerated for exercising their fundamental rights.

"Regimes like Azerbaijan, Russia or Belarus are merciless against those who question their shabby legitimacy," said Stefanie Schiffer, EPDE Chair of the Board, speaking at the European Parliament on 5th of June. "Protecting election observation means also protecting election observers. Election observers are human rights defenders – a status explicitly recognized by both the UN Special Rapporteurs and the Venice Commission. They are under enormous personal threat. Today Anar Mammadli is again in detention, but he is not the only independent election observer in Azerbaijan's prisons – also our friends Imran Aliyev, Mammad Mammadzada, and Bashir Suleymanli are among the over 300 political prisoners of Aliyev's regime."

Recent presidential and parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan occurred amid unprecedented repression, with authorities systematically targeting anyone who dared to independently monitor or criticize the electoral process, a pattern well-documented by the European Court of Human Rights. With President Aliyev reportedly considering another referendum to concentrate even more power in his hands, the elimination of independent oversight becomes even more concerning.

EU Has Not Done Enough

While European support for Belarusian civil society rightfully continues – with €30 million allocated per year for human rights support – Azerbaijan's human rights defenders have been systematically cut off from EU democracy and civil society support programs. This stark disparity has contributed to the near-complete collapse of independent civil society in Azerbaijan, where only few independent organizations now remain operational undercover or in exile.

The European Union's Eastern Partnership initiative and other democracy support programs have failed to reach those who need them most in Azerbaijan, leaving human rights defenders without the resources necessary to continue their vital work under increasingly dangerous conditions.

Similarly, the Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan documented that the Council of Europe has not only not stood up for human rights defenders in Azerbaijan, it has in fact emboldened the repression by legitimizing and funding organisations and media supportive of the government.

EPDE calls on

- The **President of Azerbaijan** to immediately and unconditionally release Anar Mammadli and his colleagues from detention and ensure he receives full compensation for all material and non-material harm caused by his unlawful imprisonment, along with immediate medical treatment for his deteriorating health condition.
- The **European Union and EU Member State governments** to actively support the remnants of Azerbaijani civil society and human rights defenders through dedicated funding mechanisms similar to those provided for Belarus, and to impose targeted sanctions on officials responsible for the systematic persecution of civil society.
- **OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)** to be vocal and active in support of citizen election observers under pressure, recognizing their crucial role as human rights defenders in upholding democratic accountability.
- The **Council of Europe Secretary General** to initiate an investigation under Article 52 of the European Convention into the misuse of law to silence civil society and on the Committee of Ministers to ensure full implementation of the Mammadli group judgments, including quashing convictions and adopting structural reforms, in absence of which to take appropriate retaliatory measures on Azerbaijan status as full member of the Council of Europe with voting rights.
- The **participating states of the European Political Community** to review their decision to allow Baku to host the Community's summit in 2027.
- The **international community** to recognize that the complete elimination of independent election observation in Azerbaijan represents a critical threat to democratic accountability in the region and demands immediate action as to critically assess Azerbaijan activities in international and multilateral fora of UN, Council of Europe, and the OSCE.

The European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) is a network of 17 independent European citizen election observation organizations. EPDE aims to support citizen election observation and to contribute to democratic election processes throughout Europe. EPDE is a signatory of the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations and the Code of Conduct for Nonpartisan Election Observation. EPDE also is a member of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM). EPDE is financially supported by the Federal Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany and the European Union.

