

Azerbaijan Journalist Says Wife Held Hostage to Make him Return

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Cloak-and-dagger meetings in a border town as police try to force journalist to come back.

An Azerbaijani journalist has accused the secret police of detaining his wife without charge to pressure him into returning to the country.

Yafez Akramoglu worked for the Prague-based radio station Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) before it ran into trouble with the authorities in Azerbaijan in December. (See **Azerbaijan Turns on US-Funded Broadcaster**.)

Prosecution service staff descended on the United States-funded broadcaster's office in Baku just three weeks after arresting Khadija Ismayilova, a leading investigative journalist who also worked for RFE/RL. Investigators seized computers, memory sticks, documents, cameras and video equipment before sealing the premises, effectively shutting down RFE/RL's operations.

After questioning staff and raiding their homes of staff, the authorities made several of them including Akramoglu the subjects of a criminal investigation. Since then, he has been in Prague to escape possible prosecution.

Akramoglu's wife Aytekin Hasanova, as well as a relative who does not want to be identified, was stopped at the airport in Nakhichevan on June 29 as they prepared to fly out after a short visit.

Nakhichevan is a part of Azerbaijan completely separated from the rest of the country by Armenia, with which the state has been technically at war since the Nagorny Karabakh conflict of the early 1990s.

Akramoglu then received a phone call from someone who he says "introduced himself as an employee of the National Security Service".

"He said that unless I came to Nakhichevan and gave myself up, they'd punish my family," the journalist said.

Four days later, police contacted other relatives in Baku to tell them that unless Yafez surrendered, the detainees would not be released.

He was told to come to the Turkish border town of Iğdır, where Azerbaijani police would meet him and take his passport. His relatives would then be allowed to fly to the Azerbaijani capital Baku, and he would then travel to Nakhichevan himself.

Akramoglu travelled from Prague to Iğdır and told the local Turkish police what was going on. Everything went to plan, except that once he received confirmation his relatives were safely in Baku, both he and the three emissaries who had come to meet him, one of them a National Security Ministry officer from Nakhichevan whom he knew, were stopped by Turkish police.

The police took him away from the others, released him and returned his passport, which they had seized from the men. He left Turkey soon afterwards.

Azerbaijani police say they know nothing about the incident, while the intelligence service accuses Akramoglu of making it up.

A duty officer at the Nakhichevan interior ministry department, which controls the uniformed police, told IWPR by phone that Akramoglu's wife was never detained at all.

"I have contacted the police department at Nakhichevan airport, and I've been told that no one by the name of Aytekin Hasanova has been detained," the officer said in a July 10 phone call.

The same day, the National Security Ministry in Nakhichevan put out a statement alleging that Akramoglu was lying.

"Since the Baku office of RFE/RL was sealed, [Akramoglu] has clearly been on the hunt for financial and political gain, and is engaging in further performances designed to keep him visible to his foreign supporters and to maintain his 'importance'," the statement said.

Akramoglu says he did not file a formal complaint with Turkish police as he was afraid the Azerbaijani

authorities would try to get him extradited on the quiet.

His wife subsequently left Azerbaijan. She told IWPR that while she was in custody in Nakhichevan, the police tried to get her to incriminate her husband.

“They handed me a document and demanded I sign it. When I looked at it, I saw that it said Yafez received money from America and used it to pay people to give negative interviews about Nakhichevan,” she said. “I refused to sign.”

The unnamed relative was released separately, on July 7.

The head of the opposition Musavat party, Isa Gambar, posted a Facebook statement calling for an end to “cruel and unlawful treatment” meted out by the authorities.

“This operation to take Yafez Akramoglu and his family hostage is a shameful thing,” he said.

IdrakAbbasov, a journalist who like many of his peers has left Azerbaijan, said the story reminded him of “gangster films”.

“Unfortunately, the Azerbaijani authorities persecute not only journalists but family members as well,” he told IWPR.

Afgan Mukhtarli is an Azerbaijani journalist living abroad.

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