

European Human Rights Body Says Concerned About Abuses in Azerbaijan

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TBILISI, Georgia — Human rights are deteriorating in Azerbaijan, a European watchdog said Wednesday, calling on the authorities to uphold regional standards and expressing concerns over what it says is a "worrying pattern" of abuse.

Azerbaijan, a mainly Muslim former Soviet republic, has been governed by President Ilham Aliyev since he succeeded his father in 2003. It has been courted by the West because of its role as an alternative to Russia in supplying oil and gas to Europe.

Rights groups accuse Azerbaijan of muzzling dissent and jailing opponents, charges the government denies.

Nils Muiznieks, human rights commissioner at the 47-nation nonexecutive Council of Europe, said he had seen no progress toward greater freedom of expression since he published his previous report in August 2013.

"Freedom of expression, assembly and association are deteriorating in Azerbaijan," he said

in Wednesday's report.

"Unjustified and selective criminal prosecution of people expressing dissenting views, including journalists, bloggers and activists, continues unabated," Muiznieks said in the report.

He cited the conviction of journalist, academic and minority rights defender Hilal Mammadov, a deputy head of the opposition Musavat Party, Tofiq Yagublu, and the leader of rights group Republican Alternative, Ilgar Mammadov.

Charges against Bizim Yol journalist, Pavriz Hashimli, online activist Abdul Abilov and blogger Omar Mammadov "lack credibility," he said.

Last week, Azeri police also arrested a prominent journalist Rauf Mirkadyrov, and prosecutors charged him with espionage.

"The recent arrest of Rauf Mirkadyrov cannot but reinforce the concerns I have about the persisting worrying pattern in Azerbaijan, which tries to muzzle free and dissenting opinions," Muiznieks said in an e-mailed response to Reuters questions.

Mirkadyrov was a political correspondent at the independent Azeri Russian-language newspaper Zerkalo, or Mirror, in Turkey, from where he was deported last week.

The commissioner also said that the repeated questioning of Azeri journalist Khadija Ismayilova, who is known for her corruption investigations, was "another disturbing example of intimidation of the press." He also cited the arrest of Anar Mammadli, head of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center, who was under investigation for an alleged tax evasion and abuse of power.

Muiznieks said that extra restrictions on the activities of nongovernmental organizations, dispersal of peaceful rallies and violation of property rights were also areas of concern.

"A fundamental issue in Azerbaijan is the need to ensure a genuine and impartial review of cases relating to fundamental freedoms by the judiciary," he said in his responses to Reuters.

The government says the country's nine million people enjoy full freedom of speech and access to a lively opposition press.

"There are no problems with human rights in Azerbaijan ... Those who talk about human rights violations in our country are biased and try to blacken Azerbaijan's image," deputy executive secretary of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party, Mubariz Gurbanly, said.

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