

Jailed Activist in Azerbaijan Wins European Human Rights Prize

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Anar Mammadli

STRASBOURG — A pan-European rights watchdog has awarded a prize to a democracy campaigner jailed in Azerbaijan, underlining its concern about human rights in the former Soviet republic.

Anar Mammadli, the head of the independent Baku-based Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre, was jailed in December on charges of tax evasion and illegal business activity after documenting widespread electoral violations.

Critics have said his imprisonment is part of a government-led crackdown on dissent in the oil-rich nation.

"Mr. Mammadli's commitment lies in the area of promoting democratic institutions and civil and political rights," Anne Brasseur, president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, said Monday as she presented the 60,000 euro (\$76,188) prize to Mammadli's

father, Asaf, in the French city of Strasbourg.

The 47-nation Council of Europe is best known for drawing up the European Convention on Human Rights, which came into force in 1953 and established the European Court of Human Rights.

Azerbaijan, a mainly Muslim country sandwiched between Russia and Iran, 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. Baku denies the charges, saying its 9-million strong population enjoys freedom of speech and access to opposition press.

Mammadli's lawyer and human rights activists have called the charges against him "unfounded," saying the verdict was politically motivated and tied to his reporting of violations in last October's vote.

International monitors also reported violations during the elections, in which Aliyev won a third straight term with nearly 85 percent of votes.

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