



LUND UNIVERSITY

Gendered Surveillance and Media Usage in Post-Soviet Space: The Case of Azerbaijan

Mehrabov, Ilkin

Published in:
Baltic Worlds

2015

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Mehrabov, I. (2015). Gendered Surveillance and Media Usage in Post-Soviet Space: The Case of Azerbaijan. *Baltic Worlds*, 8(1-2), 44-48.

Total number of authors:
1

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Gendered surveillance and media usage in post-Soviet space

The case of Azerbaijan

by **Ilkin Mehrabov**

The global magnum opus of smear campaigning against journalists happened in Azerbaijan when the sex video of the famous anti-corruption journalist Khadija Ismayilova was released on the Internet. Ismayilova, known for her critical investigative reporting, is a journalist associated with the Azerbaijani service of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, where she frequently reports on the issues of misconduct, malfeasance, and unethical business dealings of government officials and bureaucrats. As she herself describes events in an interview given to *Ms.* magazine, which she conducted while in Los Angeles to receive the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation,

the government planted a video camera in my bedroom, and they filmed me when I was with my boyfriend. In Azerbaijan you are not supposed to have a boyfriend, and you are not supposed to have sex if you are not married. Honor killings are still a huge problem in Azerbaijan. I feel that was a calculation in taping me in my bedroom. They did it in the hopes that someone in my family would arrange to kill me after seeing it. So they blackmailed

me by sending me pictures from the footage and told me to behave or I would be defamed. And, well, I didn't behave. I made it public on my own and said I was being blackmailed.'

Khadija Ismayilova's case is an illuminating example of how semi-authoritarian governments are engaging in disruptive moves against disagreeable journalists and political opponents based on the normative gender dynamics that exist in various socio-cultural contexts. Within this scope, this article is an attempt to explore the limits of gendered surveillance in Azerbaijan – that is, how and to what extent female activists and women journalists are monitored and affected by what I call the *surveillative apparatuses* of the state, both online and offline. The article also tries, albeit very briefly, to investigate the gender dimension of Azerbaijani political activism and protest practices; and how the gender stereotypes, together with the more general problem of the digital gender gap, are being used by the state authorities to control public opinion. The conceptual framework of the article is based upon two main sources of information: the netnographic narrativization of Khadija Ismayilova's case in con-

abstract

This article is an attempt to explore the limits of gendered surveillance in Azerbaijan – that is, how and to what extent female activists and women journalists are monitored and affected by the surveillative apparatuses of the state, both online and offline. The article also very briefly examines the gender dimension of Azerbaijani political activism and protest practices. The questions of how gender stereotypes, together with the more general problem of the digital gender gap, are being used by the state authorities to control the public opinion are also addressed.

KEY WORDS: Gendered surveillance, surveillative apparatuses, Khadija Ismayilova, Azerbaijan.



Young protesters being detained by police after an unsanctioned protest in the center of Baku, October 2012.

junction with an electronic correspondence conducted with her on March 30, 2013; and quantitative analysis of Internet connectivity data in Azerbaijan, obtained from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers' *Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan* survey.²

Gender and offline surveillative apparatuses in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan currently ranks 177 among the 196 studied countries (Sweden and Norway head the list) in the *Freedom of the Press 2013* report of the Freedom House;³ it ranks 156 among the 179 countries in the Reporters without Borders' 2013 *World Press Freedom Index*;⁴ and, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, is among the "top 10 worst jailers of journalists"⁵ in the world. But what happened to Khadija Ismayilova was extremely shocking even under the circumstances of a country where people are accustomed to frequent mistreatment and jailing of journalists. The blow was so low that, contrary to the blackmailers' expectations – those who had demanded that she "abandon her investigation of links between President Ilham Aliyev's family and lucrative building projects in Baku"⁶ – the journalist was fully backed by the whole society, to the point that even the "religious figures of the country [...] expressed their support"⁷ for her cause. According to Ismayilova, it was precisely because this support came from the "mosque communities and other conservatives", who are otherwise "usually among her critics",⁸ that her life was saved. As a result of the journalist's keen insistence in trying to uncover who was behind the attempt to blackmail her with the sex video, events unfolded in a way such

that "Ismayilova did not hide. Instead, she tracked the letter to a Moscow post office. She discovered curious wires inside her apartment and then found the phone company worker hired to install them"⁹ – and due to her investigations it was revealed that the camera was set up in her bedroom in July 2011, almost eight months before the blackmailing attempt took place. This incident caused a number of heated debates among the local and global human rights and media advocacy groups, as

Ismayilova is not the first Azerbaijani journalist to fall victim to such an attack. Other victims include editor-in-chief of "Azadliq" newspaper Ganimat Zahid, finance director Azer Ahmadov and reporters Natig Gulahmadoglu and Gan Tural. Video clips containing intimate scenes were posted on internet, in violation of the journalists' privacy. This pattern indicates that the Azerbaijani government, illegally deploying the technical and human resources of intelligence agencies, repeatedly organizes centralized smear campaigns against journalists who publish material critical of the government.¹⁰

All the people cited above, in a quotation taken from the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety's declaration about the case, are male journalists, with the exception of Khadija Ismayilova, who so far is the only woman publicist to be targeted with such defamation and shaming campaign attempting to silence her critical reporting. According to Ismayilova herself¹¹ there are no other accounts of female journalists or activists who were

ever targeted in such ways or imprisoned¹² – except for the very few examples of women protesters being taken into short-term custody or put into jail for brief, token periods of time, like the five-day prison term of Gozel Bayramova, deputy head of the opposition Azerbaijani Popular Front Party. Yet, as the recent consecutive arrests of first Leyla Yunus,¹³ head of the Institute of Peace and Democracy, and human rights defender working on the issues of political prisoners; and then Khadija Ismayilova¹⁴ herself, also clearly indicate, national law enforcement agencies, and hence surveillative apparatuses, are rapidly shifting towards a more gender-neutral position. Now, when it comes to the defamation of political opponents, smear campaigns against disagreeable journalists, or the jailing of professionals with oppositional stances, there are no gender differences anymore, and women are targeted in exactly the same way as their male counterparts. The similar trait can be observed when skimming through recent years' Azerbaijani protest photos and videos as well, which are filled with disturbing imagery of women activists being verbally and physically harassed, emotionally abused, forcefully dragged away, or bloodily beaten by police officers, military personnel, security guards, civil agents and other representatives of various law enforcement agencies. So, in the real, offline world, women now started to be treated in the most brutal ways, paralleling the treatment of male dissidents and journalists – be it the close surveillance of their intimate lives or the outright violence against them. Such transformation invites a closer look at the situation of women activists in the online realm.

Between modernism and traditionalism: Azerbaijani women online

Despite the numerous claims that most of the imprisoned Azerbaijani male dissidents were closely monitored and detected

with pinpoint accuracy through their social media communications and usage – such as Jabbar Savalan, a 20-year-old student member of an oppositional youth organization, being taken into custody “after he posted on Facebook calling for a ‘Day of Rage’ in Freedom Square in Baku, echoing the calls for protest in the Middle East”¹⁵ – there is no known example of any female activist being specifically targeted for her online presence and activities. Based also on the thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis of 2003-2013 Azerbaijani offline and online protests – the subject of another study seeking to build a categorical map of protests in Azerbaijan, which is not reproduced here due to the space constraints¹⁶ – it can be argued that the surveillative apparatuses of Azerbaijan, aiming to monitor and keep under control Internet users' online media and social networking practices, are currently targeting male activists only, since there are no clear indicators that the women protesters are kept under the close online surveillance as well. It can be speculated with some confidence that the national surveillative apparatuses are not fully aimed at women yet; or, to be more precise, there is no persuasive evidence that the same measures – taken to prevent an online call for action from turning into an actual offline protest, as in the case of Jabbar Savalan – are being used against women within the online world. Several phenomena could explain this.

FIRST OF ALL, DESPITE ALL the secularization and modernization processes Azerbaijan has undergone during the Soviet era, it is still very much a traditionalist country, where most of the male politicians and bureaucrats put constant emphasis on family values and “women's primary identities as mothers and wives”¹⁷ – despite the fact that Azerbaijan has one of the highest ratios of female parliamentarians¹⁸ among post-Soviet countries. In this sense it is very hard to disagree with Manijeh Sabi's claim that “Azerbaijan society remains as a fortress for patriarchy”; it is

also not very easy to explain an “inconsistency between women's economic participation in the labor force and formal emancipation of women on the one hand and their apparently subservient and male-protected position on the other”.¹⁹ Suzanne Rothman, a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant based in Baku, observes that the “gender attitudes, specifically the way men interact with women in public, remain stuck in an anachronistic rut” behind the “façade of modernity” in Azerbaijan – with women constantly being “constrained by the preferences of their male relatives” and thus mostly remaining “locked in tradition-bound roles as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters”.²⁰ Within the socio-cultural context of such a dominant patriarchy – where women are already heavily monitored and patronized within the course of everyday life through the normative gender codes established by their fathers, brothers and husbands – very little state effort is required for the additional monitoring of women's

PHOTO: VINCEBUCCI/WMF



Khadija Ismayilova received the prestigious Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) in a 2012 Los Angeles ceremony.

Frequency of Internet use by respondent's sex (%)

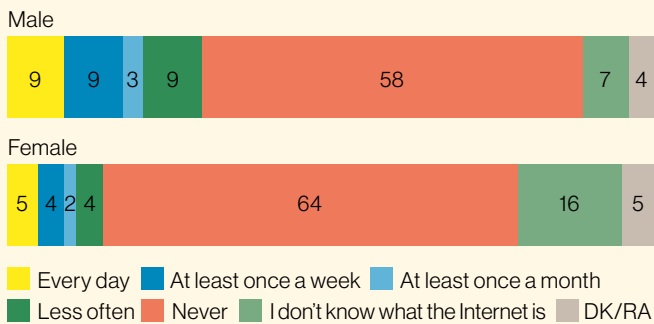


Figure 1: The distribution of Internet use by gender in Azerbaijan.²¹

online behavior and conduct. And most of the time – due to the country's extremely low Internet penetration – such state surveillance might not even be necessary, since, despite all the claims of government officials for establishing widespread and far-reaching Internet connectivity within Azerbaijan, analysis of actual numbers reveals gloomy picture, especially in relation to women's Internet usage.

As the figure provided above clearly shows, only 15% of 711 women respondents of Caucasus Research Resource Centers' *Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan* survey use the Internet frequently, if at all, and an astonishing 80% either have never used it or do not even know what the Internet is. By combining Facebook's own Ads-selling program data with the World Bank's demographic information, Katy E. Pearce, assistant professor at the University of Washington, and one of the leading experts on information-communication technologies usage in South Caucasus, provides a much more elaborated and detailed analysis of Facebook usage,²² social media platform claimed to be carefully watched by the national law enforcement and intelligence agencies in Azerbaijan. According to Dr. Pearce's calculations, only 36% of Facebook users in Azerbaijan are women – whereas in neighboring Armenia the gender balance of users is fairly even; and in Georgia there are about 10% more women than men on Facebook. In this sense, the low number of people and households having an Internet connection, combined with the much lower percentage of women – compared with men – using the Internet in everyday life, might explain the lack of evidence of surveillance of online women activists.

Concluding remarks

Although the conditions of the Azerbaijani female activists depicted here might seem depressing – with women dissidents being surveilled and intimidated in the offline world because of their professional roles and oppositional positions, and the lack of women in the online realm – not everything is so gloomy. The case of Khadija Ismayilova being blackmailed with a sex video proved the emergence of something extraordinarily different in relation to the classic operational grounds of Azerbaijani online and offline female activism. The attempt to silence a woman

journalist through a defamation campaign based on her private life was widely discussed, especially in the Facebook forums of religious women dissidents; and although many of these religious women did not approve of premarital sex at all, the plain fact that this most intimate moment was recorded and distributed through the Internet, with the putative governmental involvement, elicited open criticism and harsh condemnation. Such an expression of strong solidarity of religious women with Khadija Ismayilova's quest for justice might also explain – although this is pure speculation – the surprising support the journalist received from the religious communities in Azerbaijan. Circumstances like this point to an emerging possibility and potential for the formation of alternative online platforms, leading to a greater empowerment of women and gender equality through merging various, otherwise separate, female activist movements – especially given that so far there is no proof of online women dissidents being surveilled. Despite the currently low number of women connected to the Internet, there is a growing tendency among Azerbaijani women's organizations and female activists to build websites, start discussion forums, and establish Facebook groups – indicators of a healthy growth of Internet portals and milieus related to women's issues, which might foster a dialog and mutual understanding among women with different backgrounds. ✕

Ilkin Mehrabov, Department of Geography, Media & Communication Studies, Karlstad University, Sweden.

references

- 1 Anita Little, "Blackmail, Courage and the Truth: An Interview with Khadija Ismayilova", *Ms.*, October 29, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/10/29/blackmail-courage-and-the-truth-an-interview-with-khadija-ismayilova>.
- 2 Caucasus Barometer is the annual household survey about social and economic issues, as well as political attitudes, conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRRC). CRRRC's *Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan* survey was conducted nationwide between October 1, 2011, and November 2, 2011, and in total 1481 adults of at least 18 years of age (of which 48% were women) were interviewed face-to-face using the Azerbaijani language.
- 3 The report states that the situation in Azerbaijan worsened compared with previous years, mainly "due to an increase in violence against journalists and legal amendments that limited access to information". FH, *Freedom of the Press 2013: Middle East Volatility amid Global Decline* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2013), 8.
- 4 Reporters without Borders report states that the current situation in Azerbaijan indicates that the "noose tightened around what remained of the opposition media". RSF, *World Press Freedom Index 2013* (Paris: Reporters without Borders, 2013), 14.
- 5 Elana Beiser, "Second Worst Year on Record for Jailed Journalists", *Committee to Protect Journalists*, December 18, 2013. Accessed January 10, 2014, <http://www.cpj.org/reports/2013/12/second-worst-year-on-record-for-jailed-journalists.php>.
- 6 Amanda Erickson, "Sending Out an SOS: A New Low in Azerbaijan", *Columbia Journalism Review* 51, no. 2 (2012): 12.
- 7 RFE/RL, "RFE/RL Journalist Says She Won't Be Intimidated by Blackmail

- Campaign”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 14, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbajijani_journalist_defiant_over_blackmail/24515283.html
- 8 Ben Brumfield, “Salacious Video Defames Journalist Critical of Azerbaijani Government”, CNN, March 20, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/19/world/asia/azerbaijan-video-defamation/index.html>
 - 9 Amanda Erickson, “Khadija Ismayilova”, *The Atlantic* 310, no. 4 (2012): 51.
 - 10 IRFS/IFEX, “Anti-Corruption Journalist Receives Threats, Explicit Images”, *The Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety/International Freedom of Expression Exchange*, March 8, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2013, http://www.ifex.org/azerbaijan/2012/03/08/ismayilova_threatened
 - 11 Khadija Ismayilova, personal communication with author, March 30, 2013.
 - 12 According to the updated list of political prisoners, released by the Baku-based Human Rights Club on October 1, 2013, there are two females in Azerbaijani jails among the 142 persons imprisoned for politically motivated reasons. Within the published list both of them are placed under the rubric of Other Cases, with very brief information being provided: “Beylerqizi Shamsiyya - member of the Union of Azerbaijani Journalists and Writers”; and “Safaraliyeva, Shafaq - resident who complained about the Zerdab District Executive Authority head Lutfali Babayev.” When a more thorough Internet search with these names is conducted no other information, but the list itself, can be found online. Although this might be related with the differences in pronunciations of names in their original vernacular forms and English neither of women were mentioned by Khadija Ismayilova during the personal communication as well. Human Rights Club, “Azerbaijan: An Updated List of Political Prisoners”, *The Civic Solidarity Platform*, October 1, 2013. Accessed May 4, 2014, <http://civicsolidarity.org/article/800/azerbaijan-updated-list-political-prisoners>.
 - 13 Daisy Sindelar, “Together A Lifetime, Azeri Activists Now Apart And In Jail”, *RFE/RL*, August 26, 2014. Accessed November 6, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-yunus-couple-apart-in-jail/26551508.html>.
 - 14 HRW, “Azerbaijan: Investigative Journalist Arrested”, *Human Rights Watch*, December 5, 2014. Accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/05/azerbaijan-investigative-journalist-arrested>.
 - 15 AI, *Amnesty International Public Statement: Azerbaijani Youth Activists Targeted after Using Facebook to Call for Protests* (London: Amnesty International, 2011), 1.
 - 16 Ilkin Mehrabov, “Surveillance, Gender and Social Media: New Politics of Opposition in Azerbaijan” (paper presented at the 9th International Conference Crossroads in Cultural Studies, Paris, France, July 2-6, 2012).
 - 17 Niloofer Osuli, “Feminism in Republic of Azerbaijan in Globalized World”, *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 9, no. 1 (2011): 44-50.
 - 18 According to the World Bank statistics on the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliaments, 16% of Azerbaijani *Milli Majlis* are women. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>
 - 19 Manijeh Sabi, “The Impact of Economic and Political Transformation on Women: The Case of Azerbaijan”, *Central Asian Survey* 18, no. 1 (1999): 111-120.
 - 20 Suzanne Rothman, “Azerbaijan: When Will the Catcalls Stop?”, *EurasiaNet.org*, January 10, 2014. Accessed March 2, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67929>
 - 21 The graphic is derived from the Caucasus Research Resource Centers’ *Caucasus Barometer 2011 Azerbaijan survey*’s dataset, available at the <http://www.crrc.ge/oda/?dataset=17&row=157&column=2&print=true>
 - 22 Katy E. Pearce, “Facebook in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – 2013 – With a Gender Focus”, Katy Pearce Blog, January 13, 2014. Accessed February 2, 2014, <http://www.katyp Pearce.net/facebook-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-2013-with-a-gender-focus>



V. Lebedev, “Good Hands”, *Sovetskoe Foto* 6 (1964).