

AZERBAIJAN: Azerbaijan seeks court action to ban RFE/RL website

Radio Free Europe (27.04.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2p1AU4b> – In an escalation of a targeted campaign against RFE/RL, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Communications and High Technologies has filed an official complaint with a Baku court requesting that RFE/RL's Azerbaijani website, azadliq.org, be banned.

The Sabail district court ruled on April 27 to convene on May 1 to begin a review of the ministry's complaint, which also seeks to ban the websites of the nongovernmental Azadliq newspaper (unrelated to azadliq.org) and Meydan TV, and the Turan TV and Azerbaijan Saati TV channels.

RFE/RL President Thomas Kent called the ministry's action an attempt at "blatant censorship that is intended to intimidate the independent press, and which shows nothing but contempt for basic rights and international conventions."

The complaint filed with the court indicates that the website has been blocked since March 27, subsequent to recent legislation that tightens Internet restrictions and authorizes the Azerbaijani government, subject to judicial review, to ban sites for posting content deemed to promote violence, hatred, or extremism, violate privacy, or constitute slander. Independent monitors confirmed in an April 10 report that Delta Telecom, one of Azerbaijan's biggest Internet service providers, had used "dedicated equipment" to interfere with traffic to the Azerbaijani Service's website.

According to Azerbaijani legislation, a guilty judgement by the court against azadliq.org could be used as grounds to prosecute the website's correspondents. In 2014, authorities imprisoned prominent investigative reporter

Khadija Ismayilova on charges of encouraging an attempted suicide and financial crimes in a case that foreign governments and rights advocates condemned as politically motivated.

Ismayilova's arrest came just weeks before Azerbaijani state agents raided and sealed RFE/RL's Baku bureau, forcing it to close in May, 2015. RFE/RL continues to pursue legal remedies in this case.

RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service is a major source of independent news for the country, actively publishing on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and other digital platforms. It recently reported on the financial activities of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and members of his inner circle, and investigated costs associated with the September 2016 referendum that extended the term of the presidency to seven years, and which created the post of Vice President, to which the president's wife was appointed in February.

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