

# Azerbaijan Cancels EU Delegation Visit After 'Biased' Human Rights Criticism

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European Union flags flutter outside the EU Commission headquarters in Brussels.

Azerbaijan canceled a European Commission delegation visit on Friday and said it might review relations with the EU after the bloc's parliament called on it to free an investigative journalist and several human rights figures.

Rights activists in the oil- and gas-exporting former Soviet republic have accused President Ilham Aliyev of waging a broad campaign to muzzle dissent by jailing his critics. Baku says the country enjoys full free speech and a lively opposition media.

The European Parliament passed a resolution on Thursday calling for the immediate and unconditional release of investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova and several other Azeri human rights activists and lawyers.

"The decision to cancel the [European Commission] visit is linked to a biased resolution on Azerbaijan," the Azeri Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

"In general, we should review our ties with the European Union, where anti-Azeri and anti-Islam tendencies are strong."

Aliyev's government says the Caspian Sea country, a mainly Muslim republic of 9 million people, enjoys full freedom of speech and a lively opposition media.

Despite criticism of its rights record, the West has courted Azerbaijan as an alternative to Russia for oil and gas supplies.

The European Commission delegation had been due to visit Azerbaijan next week to discuss a proposed strategic partnership agreement.

The Foreign Ministry on Friday summoned Malena Mard, the resident EU delegation chief in Azerbaijan, over the resolution and told this was a blow to Azeri-EU relations.

"The constant biased attitude of the European parliament to Azerbaijan shows that the human rights issue is used as a tool of political pressure on the country," said Mahmud Mammadgulyev, a deputy foreign minister.

"But the European parliament members should know that these attempts are doomed to be unsuccessful from the very beginning."

Ismayilova, 39, works for U.S. government-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and is known for exposing corruption among Baku's ruling elite. She was sentenced on Sept. 1 to 7 1/2 years in jail after being convicted of embezzlement, illegal business activities, tax evasion and abuse of her position.

Rights groups condemned the case as politically motivated.

Azerbaijan jailed two rights activists in August and one more in April.

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