Khadija Ismayilova (Azerbaijan)

“for her courage and tenacity in exposing corruption at the highest levels of government through outstanding investigative journalism in the name of transparency and accountability”.

Khadija Ismayilova is Azerbaijan’s most outstanding contemporary investigative journalist. In the past decade, her investigative reporting has revealed a wide range of corrupt and lucrative business deals involving President Aliyev’s family members. She has provided irrefutable evidence of corruption at the highest levels of Azerbaijan’s government, which also involved multinational companies like TeliaSonera. Significantly, her articles have uncovered how the wealth of the nation has been plundered, routed abroad and used to influence European politicians. For publishing articles on government corruption, Ismayilova has been subjected to smear campaigns, harassment and fabricated criminal charges. Despite serving one and a half years in prison, Ismayilova has refused to be silenced, and continues to write. Ismayilova also addresses Azerbaijan’s poor human rights record, consistently raising the issue of political prisoners in the country and provided their families with moral and material support. As the government continues to intimidate and jail journalists with an alarming frequency, Ismayilova remains resolute in courageously writing and speaking out for greater government accountability and good governance in Azerbaijan.

Uncovering corruption at the highest levels of government

Khadija Ismayilova was born on May 21, 1976 and graduated from Baku State University with a degree in philology in 1997. She worked as a journalist for a number of media outlets including Caspian Business News, the newspaper Zerkalo, the Washington office of Voice of America and with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. She is also an investigative reporter with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), an investigative reporting platform formed by 40 non-profit investigative centers, journalists and several major regional news organizations around the globe.

Azerbaijan is the third largest producer of oil in Eurasia but, despite being a member of the Council of Europe, has a very poor human rights record. Reporters without Borders ranks Azerbaijan 162 out of 183 countries in its 2017 World Press Freedom Index, and the government led by autocratic president Ilham Aliyev has consistently bribed, blackmailed, harassed and jailed independent investigative journalists and closed independent media platforms. Despite this intimidating atmosphere, Ismayilova in 2009 started her investigative reporting on the level of state corruption, which was highly unusual in Azerbaijan. Her reports shed a light on the business activities of the president, his family and his family’s close circle. In her reports, Ismayilova revealed information about their business activities, which were routed through proxies and offshore tax havens. These included business...
dealings by the Aliyev family involved in construction projects connected to the Eurovision Song Contest, purchase of luxurious real estate and secret family interests in gold and silver mines and Azerbaijani telecoms. The latter has also implicated multinational companies like Swedish-Finnish telecoms giant TeliaSonera.

Further, Ismayilova’s investigative journalism revealed links between the first family of Azerbaijan and an alleged bribe scandal involving Luca Volontè – an Italian member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Volontè is facing trial in Milan on allegations that he received €2.39 million in bribes to mute the body’s criticism of Azerbaijan’s human rights record. Thus, Ismayilova’s work has been crucial in exposing the corrupt nexus between the Azerbaijani government and European businesses and politicians that has sustained an authoritarian regime plundering the wealth of the nation.

Enduring harassment, smear campaigns and imprisonment as a consequence of her journalism

For her courageous work in exposing corruption, Ismayilova has been subject to the full spectrum of gendered attacks on women human rights defenders and journalists. In March 2012, Ismayilova received a letter containing intimate photos of her, with a note warning her that she would be shamed if she did not stop her work. It was clear that unknown persons had broken into her apartment and placed hidden cameras in her room. Ismayilova bravely refused to give in and publicly exposed the blackmail attempt, leading to an intimate video of her being circulated on the internet. Later Ismayilova discovered that the filming was conducted with participation of the local state-owned telephone company. Following this, an article attacking Ismayilova’s character appeared in a number of newspapers owned by the state and the ruling party.

Far from being silenced, Ismayilova expanded her work and began advocating for the rights of Azerbaijan’s human rights defenders, several of whom were arrested in the summer of 2014. Ismayilova was one of the few individuals who continued to fearlessly raise the issue of political prisoners and provided their families with much needed moral and material support. For her continued outspoken criticism of the president and his close circle, Ismayilova was arrested on 5 December 2014 and initially detained on trumped up charges of driving a former colleague to attempt suicide. The colleague later publicly announced that he was forced to testify against Ismayilova by high-level officials of the Baku City Prosecutor’s office and Ministry of National Security. Her arrest came one day after the head of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan, Ramiz Mehdiyev, published a 60-page statement naming Ismayilova as being the best example of journalists working against the government.

On 15 February 2015, three months after her arrest, Ismayilova was formally charged with embezzlement, illegal business, tax evasion and abuse of power, which curiously mirror the crimes committed by president Aliyev and his family as exposed through her journalism. Ismayilova was found guilty and sentenced to seven and a half years in prison in September 2015. Her imprisonment was vociferously condemned by every major international human rights organisation, with Amnesty International naming her a prisoner of conscience. After a strong international campaign, Ismayilova was finally released on 25 May 2016 after spending one and a half years in prison. While Azerbaijan’s Supreme Court decided to commute her sentence into a three and a half year
suspended term, the Ministry of Justice nevertheless imposed travel restrictions on Ismayilova, who is now forbidden from traveling abroad. Ismayilova’s attempts to lift the travel ban for attending international events have been rejected by local courts.

**Keeping the flame of independent journalism burning in Azerbaijan**

In spite of all that she has endured, Ismayilova continues her work as an independent investigative journalist. Her numerous objective and timely investigative reports and her collaboration with civil society organisations and human rights defenders has received worldwide acclaim, with UNESCO honouring her as the recipient of its annual Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize in May 2016. Earlier, while she was imprisoned, the PEN America Center, which advocates for freedom of expression, recognised her for her journalistic achievements by presenting her with their media freedom award in May 2015.

On 1 September 2017, Turan Agency, Azerbaijan’s last remaining independent news service, announced it was shutting down operations following the arrest of its Director Mehman Aliyev. On 4 September 2017, OCCRP (where Ismayilova still works as an investigative reporter) in collaboration with Berlingske newspaper and several leading European publications including Guardian and Le Monde published a series called the Azerbaijani Laundromat, which revealed how the Azerbaijani ruling elite operated a secret $2.9 billion scheme to pay prominent Europeans, buy luxury goods and launder money through a network of opaque British companies. Khadija Ismayilova was one of the authors of the investigation. Her courage, professionalism, and integrity is required now more than ever in the endeavour to advance accountability, good governance, and human rights in Azerbaijan and beyond.