

Ilham Aliyev's Suspicion of Independent Media

written by BRI History Studies Group BAİ Tarix Araşdırmaları Qrupu

In February 2026, while attending the 62nd Munich Security Conference in Munich, Germany, President Ilham Aliyev responded to Emin Huseynov, who introduced himself as a representative of independent media, by stating that “there is no independent media anywhere in the world,” and refused to hear the journalist’s question.

In this article, we address two important issues. First, what is independent media, and does independent media exist in the contemporary world? Second, does Ilham Aliyev genuinely not believe that independent media exists anywhere in the world, or is he instead expressing intolerance toward the very existence of independent media?

At first glance, the second issue may appear speculative and methodologically unscientific. How can one prove what a person does or does not believe? Yet finding an answer to this seemingly speculative and difficult question is not, in fact, impossible. The policies pursued by Ilham Aliyev during his time in power, his treatment of individuals and media outlets that express dissenting views and positions, and the interventions and amendments he has introduced into legislation in order to bring the media under his control all indicate that he does, in fact, believe in the existence of independent media. His efforts, using all available means, to push independent media out of Azerbaijan’s public sphere demonstrate his intolerance toward its existence.

Why Did the Press Emerge?

The press is commonly defined as a form of periodical publication issued at regular intervals, whether daily,

weekly, or monthly. In the contemporary period, the term *press*, which was once primarily associated with newspapers, has increasingly been replaced by the terms *mass media* and *media*. In this article, we will use these terms synonymously.

Media emerged as a means of transmitting information to broad audiences and to the public. Over time, it underwent a long process of development, encompassing newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and social networks. The earliest examples of the press in its modern sense appeared in Europe. The first handwritten newspapers emerged in Venice[\[1\]](#) in the sixteenth century, while printed newspapers appeared in the seventeenth century in the territory of present-day Germany.[\[2\]](#)

In Azerbaijan, the history of the press began somewhat later, toward the end of the nineteenth century. The first press organs operated under the control of the political authorities existing in the territories where they were established, and they mainly covered foreign news and domestic prices.

Until the nineteenth century, broad readerships did not have access to newspapers, as both the price of newspapers and the literacy level of the population made them inaccessible to the general public. This situation changed in the nineteenth century. High-speed printing presses reduced the cost of newspapers, while European governments' policies of extending education to the poorer strata of the population increased overall literacy levels. By the early twentieth century, newspapers had become mass media in the true sense of the term.

Since its emergence, the press has fulfilled various functions. For example, it has been used as a powerful instrument of propaganda. Propaganda is the dissemination of information—facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or falsehoods—with the aim of influencing public opinion.[\[3\]](#) In this sense, Maximilian I, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire,

may be regarded as one of the first political figures to use the power of the printing press for propagandistic purposes. By presenting one side of the wars he waged—namely, his own—Maximilian was able both to strengthen patriotic sentiment among his subjects and enhance his personal image[4].

The press is also a business structure. Most media outlets in the world are commercial in nature. Their existence depends on advertising space within the publication and on the payments made by subscribers.

What Is Independent Media?

In March 2026, Aynur Elgünəş (Gambarova), the imprisoned editor-in-chief of Meydan TV, stated in her court testimony that Meydan TV is an independent media outlet and has no political objectives. According to her, it scrutinizes not individuals, but the work and policies of the government. She added that even if the government were to change the following day, Meydan TV would not turn into pro-government media.[5] What, then, is independent media, and is independent media possible in the contemporary world?

Independent media is defined as a mass media outlet that is not under the control of the government, corporations, or institutions linked to political power. Studies examining media ownership and financing in 97 countries have shown that most media outlets are either controlled by governments or owned by wealthy families.[6] This is because control over mass communication technologies creates significant opportunities and advantages, including the ability to exercise political influence and gain public visibility.[7]

In media controlled by governments, press freedom is usually suppressed, economic and political rights are weakly represented, and social problems—such as issues related to education and healthcare—are not covered objectively. Yet ensuring citizens' access to objective information is of considerable importance in the modern world. In the political

sphere, free access to information enables citizens to obtain information about politicians and public figures and to make more informed decisions when voting. In the economic sphere, information is important for consumers in making appropriate choices when meeting their daily needs and in making sound investment decisions regarding their financial resources. Access to information is considered one of the cornerstones of the effective functioning of both political and economic markets.[\[8\]](#)

The fact that information of social, political, and economic significance plays an important role in the life of societies and states makes the question of who controls the various mass media through which such information is disseminated particularly relevant. Should the media be controlled by the government or by private entities? There is no unequivocal answer to this question.

Some scholars argue that, since the government is responsible for public welfare and the provision of social needs, it may be better positioned to protect people's interests and prevent them from falling under the influence of misinformation and manipulation. Vladimir Lenin, for example, believed that a press controlled not by the government but by private companies would serve the interests of the ruling class.[\[9\]](#)

However, contemporary research does not confirm that the interests of society are protected in states where the government maintains a monopoly over the media. On the contrary, such research shows that in states where the media is monopolized by the government, state ownership tends to dominate the economy, and economic development is placed under full state control. These states are also characterized by authoritarian governance[\[10\]](#).

Does the fact that, in most countries of the world, the press is under the influence of the government or wealthy family corporations close to political power negate the existence of

independent media?

Recent developments in information technologies, together with the fact that informational materials are now produced and disseminated not only by professional journalists but also by ordinary citizens, public activists, and think tanks, raise serious questions about the extent to which mass media can be considered independent, as well as about the transparency, plurality, and legal conformity of the information space.[\[11\]](#)

However, the expression “to be independent” has several different meanings, and from the perspective of social theory it is possible to explain why skepticism regarding the existence of independent media is misplaced. In general terms, “being independent” is understood primarily as being free from the influence of others, acting on the basis of the personal position of an individual or organization, and expressing one’s own views. In the context of social theory, independence refers to autonomy and self-government; that is, the capacity to determine one’s own rules and to organize one’s activity in accordance with those rules.[\[12\]](#)

From the perspective of democratic theory, independence is understood as the emancipation of the public sphere from the systematic power of the state.[\[13\]](#) Taking this principle as his point of departure, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, for example, argues that in complex societies, self-regulating media systems make deliberative political communication possible when they are independent of the existing social environment.[\[14\]](#)

What, then, makes such media systems possible—that is, media capable of remaining free from the influence of the existing social environment?

It should first be noted that the concept of press independence depends on the type of mass media outlet in question. The independence of private media organizations is explained by their financial non-dependence on the state and,

consequently, by the absence of government pressure resulting from such dependence. The independence of public media, by contrast, means that it is not dependent on advertising, media owners, or other external sources[\[15\]](#).

Media independence, as well as freedom of thought and expression, is usually supported and promoted domestically by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) [\[16\]](#). The term NGO was incorporated into the Charter of the United Nations in 1945 and was defined as referring to groups working for the public good.[\[17\]](#)

Globally and domestically, an NGO is an organization established in response to humanitarian and social challenges, operating outside government control, possessing diverse sources of funding, and serving as a bridge between the authorities and society. NGOs may be either for-profit or non-profit entities. Although most NGOs are not dependent on the government, part of their funding may come from state grants. In general, however, their principal sources of funding consist of private donations and funds allocated by international institutions.

NGOs are often identified with civil society organizations (CSOs), which are established by citizens for specific social purposes. These organizations engage in charitable activity, provide various services to segments of the population that are weakly represented in the public sphere, implement projects aimed at addressing social problems, and support public education by helping people understand the factors affecting their lives and by encouraging measures to address them.[\[18\]](#)

In addition, there are many international organizations that support free media, although their financial expenditure on independent media is not particularly high. For example, in recent years, only eight percent of the total funding allocated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD)—an association of developed states that recognize the principles of representative democracy and a free-market economy—to the promotion of good governance has been spent on supporting independent media[\[19\]](#).

Azerbaijani Media under the Aliyevs' Rule

Approximately one month after being elected president in November 1993, Heydar Aliyev attended a meeting with the leaders of Azerbaijan's political parties and public movements. Speaking about the Azerbaijani press, he stated:

How are these newspapers being published? Recently, when I was working in the Supreme Soviet, it was impossible to publish the newspaper Azerbaijan; it had stopped, because the state had no money. Yet the newspaper Jümhuriyyət is published three times a week. Azadlıq is published even more often. Müsavat is published in an even larger format than Azerbaijan. Where do they get this money from? Is this money earned through honest labor? Where does this money come from? With what resources are these newspapers being published? Is this not the money of mafia groups? Or perhaps they are publishing these newspapers with money inherited from their ancestors?[\[20\]](#)

According to Aliyev, the press that criticized him could not have been financed by subscribers and readers, but only by "mafia groups." Of the three newspapers Aliyev named and regarded as in opposition to him, two later entered government service. *Azadlıq*, which did not change its position, ceased its print publication in 2016 during Ilham Aliyev's rule. In 2017, by decision of the Supreme Court, the newspaper's online version, the website *Azadlıq.info*, was blocked.

The freedom of expression and public space that existed in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s gradually narrowed, while restrictions against independent media became possible through the phased introduction of restrictive legislation, the destruction of the financial sources that made independent media viable, the suppression of the free-market economy, and

the establishment of monopolies in the economy by separate business structures linked to the authorities or formed with their support. This process is most clearly manifested in the formation of restrictive legislation.

Article 50 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, adopted in 1995, enshrined citizens' right to obtain information by lawful means.[\[21\]](#) In 1998, Heydar Aliyev signed the Law on Freedom of Information.[\[22\]](#) In 2000, the Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (Public Associations and Foundations) also entered into force.[\[23\]](#)

These laws adopted under Heydar Aliyev became possible on the basis of recommendations from international organizations that allocated large loans to Azerbaijan, such as the World Bank, as well as from states and institutions that supported representative democracy and liberal rights and made significant investments in Azerbaijan, such as the European Union. However, it is no secret to ordinary Azerbaijani citizens that these laws have not been implemented in Azerbaijan and have not been observed in practice.

Financial revenues generated from the sale of Azerbaijan's natural resources gradually reduced Ilham Aliyev's dependence on international organizations and foreign investors, which in turn led to the narrowing of the space allocated domestically to democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and press freedom. Amendments began to be introduced to the laws adopted during Heydar Aliyev's rule that were supposed to guarantee freedom of activity to media and public organizations.

The amendments made in 2014 to the Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (Public Associations and Foundations) resulted in such organizations being brought under the influence of executive authorities, the restriction of their activities, and the imposition of high fines for violations of the adopted legislation. The law also imposed restrictions on financial

and banking operations related to obligations and contracts arising from services and work financed by unregistered foreign sources of funding.[\[24\]](#)

By imposing legislative restrictions on the activity of foreign donors in Azerbaijan, the Azerbaijani government deprived local NGOs of their independence by making them dependent on funding from the state budget. In an interview with the Russian media outlet *Rossiya Segodnya* in December 2024, Ilham Aliyev explained the rationale behind the restrictive legislation concerning NGOs and offered advice on how to combat democracy.[\[25\]](#) In the interview, Aliyev emphasized that there had once been many NGOs in Azerbaijan, that those working in these organizations did not receive salaries from the state budget, and that, for this reason, they possessed an independent voice.

In 2005, Ilham Aliyev signed the Law on Access to Information.[\[26\]](#) This law, consisting of 58 articles, has since been amended 32 times. Article 2 of the law states that access to information is free in the Republic of Azerbaijan. Article 37 clarifies what types of information should not be considered information intended for official use. However, Azerbaijani citizens are not granted access to most of the information listed in that article.[\[27\]](#)

Finally, in 2021, a law was adopted that directly affected media independence.[\[28\]](#) In addition to seriously restricting Azerbaijani citizens' freedom of expression, this law demonstrates the Azerbaijani government's disregard for, and failure to comply with, the obligations it has undertaken before international organizations and the international instruments it has ratified. Azerbaijan ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly, in 1992,[\[29\]](#) and the European Convention on Human Rights in 2002.[\[30\]](#)

The law imposes numerous legally vague prohibitions concerning

the content of information published and broadcast in the media (Article 14.1). In addition, it creates opportunities and conditions for a government-established Council (Article 14.2) to interfere in the activities of media outlets. Although the law refers to principles such as independence, impartiality, and objectivity in the operation of the regulatory body, the Council (Article 44), the claim that an institution financed from the state budget (Article 43.2) can be independent and impartial raises serious doubts.

Thus, legislation that was adopted during Heydar Aliyev's rule but not implemented in practice, and that was substantially revised and amended during Ilham Aliyev's rule, has turned into a punitive mechanism that deprives the press of independent financial sources and, thereby, renders its existence impossible.

During Ilham Aliyev's rule, legal and regulatory pressures directed against media independence have been accompanied by threats and violence against journalists who scrutinize the government's narratives. The most prominent example of this is Elmar Huseynov, the editor-in-chief of the weekly newspaper *Monitor*, who was murdered in 2005.

Throughout this period, public activists and journalists expressing independent views in Azerbaijan have constantly been subjected to pressure, threats, and violent attacks. Since 2024, Azerbaijani society has witnessed not only the prosecution of individual journalists, but also the prosecution of employees of media organizations such as *Abzas Media* (six people), *Toplum TV* (ten people), and *Meydan TV* (eleven people) under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code, concerning smuggling.

Conclusion

Several conditions make independent media possible in a state. These include a market economy based on free competition, legislation that enables fundamental freedoms, and an

independent judiciary. A market economy allows the financial sources of independent media to emerge. Legislation that enables fundamental freedoms—freedom of thought, expression, and speech—constitutes the legal basis for the existence of independent media. Independent courts, in turn, act as guarantors of these rights.

In states with historically democratic traditions, the existence of independent media is not called into question because these conditions are secured. In states such as Azerbaijan, which have emerged from a totalitarian system, democratic traditions are weak or entirely absent; therefore, the possibility of independent media depends directly on the will of those in power. The government's failure to secure these conditions does not negate the possible existence of independent media; rather, it reveals the government's intolerance toward it.

Notes and References:

[1] Jerilyn McIntyre, "The 'Avvisi' of Venice: Toward an Archaeology of Media Forms. *Journalism history*, Vol.14, Issue 2-3, 1987, 68-77.

[2] Johannes Weber. Strassburg, 1605: The Origins of the Newspaper in Europe. *German History*, 2006, Vol.24, Issue 3, 391.

[3] Smith, Bruce L. "Propaganda". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda>.

əldə edilib 19 mart 2026

[4] Silver, Larry. *Marketing Maximilian: the visual ideology of a Holy Roman Emperor*. Princeton University Press, 2008.

[5] Aynur Elgünəş: "Kəfənin cibi yoxdur". *Azadlıq qəzeti*, 14 mart 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/azadliqqazeti>

[6] Djankov, S., Caralee, M., Nenova, T., and Shleifer, A. (2003). Who owns the media? *Journal of Law and Economics*, 46(2): 341–381.

[7] Demsetz, Harold, 1989, “The Amenity Potential of Newspapers and the Reporting of Presidential Campaigns,” in Demsetz, H., *Efficiency, Competition and Policy*, Basil Blackwell, London.

[8] Stiglitz, Joseph E., 2000, “The Contributions of the Economics of Information to Twentieth Century Economics,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 115, 4: 1441-1478.

[9] Ленин, В. И. Как обеспечить успех Учредительного собрания. Полное собрание сочинений. 5-е изд. Политиздат, 1969. Т. 34. Июль – октябрь 1917, 208–213.

[10] Djankov, 372-3.

[11] McBride, Kelly, and Tom Rosenstiel. “Introduction: New Guiding Principles for a New Era of Journalism.” In *The New Ethics of Journalism. Principles for the 21st Century*, edited by Kelly McBride and Tom Rosenstiel, 1–6. Sage, 2013

[12] Weber, Max. “The Nature of Social Action”. In Runciman, Garry (ed.). *Max Weber: Selections in Translation*. Translated by Matthews, Eric. Cambridge University Press, 2011 pp. 7–32; Bourdieu, Pierre. *Politics and Sociology: General Sociology*, Volume 5: Lectures at the Collège de France 1985–1986, Polity Press, 2023.

[13] Bohman, James. “The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy.” *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 1998, 6 (4): 400–425.

[14] Habermas, Jürgen. “Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research.” *Communication Theory*, 2006, 16 (4): 411–426.

[15] Kari Karppinen & Hallvard Moe (2016) What We Talk About When Talk About “Media Independence”, *Javnost – The Public*, 23:2, 109,

[16] Kalathil, Shanthi A Slowly Shifting Field: Understanding Donor Priorities in Media Development. Center for International media Assistant, April 2017, <https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/slowly-shifting-field/>.

[17] United Nations Charter. Chapter X, Article 71, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>. Əldə edilib 19 mart 2026.

[18] Willetts, Peter. “What is a Non-Governmental Organization?”. UNESCO Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems. City University London. <https://www.staff.city.ac.uk/p.willetts/CS-NTWKS/NGO-ART.HTM>. Əldə edilib 19 mart 2026.

[19] Mapping ODA to media and information environment integrity. DAC Network on Governance. 2023, .57. [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/GOVNET\(2023\)13/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/GOVNET(2023)13/en/pdf)

[20] Heydər Əliyev. Azərbaycanın siyasi partiyalarının və istimai hərəkatlarının rəhbərləri ilə görüşdə çıxışı. 17 noyabr 1993, Heydər Əliyev Müstəqilliyimiz əbədidir, Kitab 1, Azərneşr, 1997, 255.

[21] Azərbaycan Respublikasının Konstitusiyası. Maddə 50. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/897>. Əldə edilib 20 mart 2026.

[22] Məlumat azadlığı haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasının qanunu. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/3420>. Əldə edilib 20 mart 2026.

[23] Qeyri-hökumət təşkilatları (ictimai birliklər və fondlar) haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasının qanunu. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/511>. Əldə edilib 20 mart 2026.

[24] “Qeyri-hökumət təşkilatının, habelə xarici dövlətlərin

qeyri-hökumət təşkilatlarının filial və ya nümayəndəliklərinin qəbul etdiyi ianələrin məbləği və ianəni vermiş şəxslər barədə məlumatların təqdim edilməsi Qaydası”nın təsdiq edilməsi barədə Azərbaycan Respublikası Nazirlər Kabinetinin qərarı. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/31255>. Əldə edilib 19 mart 2026.

[25] Интервью Ильхама Алиева Дмитрию Киселеву, <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20241218/intervyu-aliev-video-49351834.html>

[26] İnformasiya əldə etmək haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasının qanunu. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/11142>. Əldə edilib 19 mart 2026.

[27] Vətəndaşların informasiya növünə uyğun olaraq müvafiq dövlət strukturlarına müraciəti ya cavablandırılmır, ya da həmin strukturlar vətəndaşların sorğuları üçün əlçatan deyil.

[28] Media haqqında Azərbaycan Respublikasının qanunu. <https://e-qanun.az/framework/49124>.

[29] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. United Nations Human Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

[30] European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Euro-Lex. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISUM:eu_human_rights_convention.