

The timeline leading from anti-LGBTI Instagram posts to the “honour killing” of an LGBTI activist in Azerbaijan

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The cousin of LGBTI activist Avaz Hafizli has been jailed for his horrific murder, which came on foot of protests against hateful Instagram posts by the Instagram star, Sevinj Huseynova, who called for the physical ‘removal’ of sexual minorities and trans people from Azerbaijan. The trial was a travesty of justice, according to activists.

On 22 February 2022, the Azeri LGBTQ+ activist and journalist, Avaz Hafizli was brutally murdered by his cousin, 24-year-old Amrulla Gulaliyev. Local LGBTI activists in Azerbaijan believe the murder was motivated by homophobic bias and to protect the “honour” of the family.

The case has been investigated and last month Gulaliyev was sentenced to nine years and six months by Baku Court of Grave Crimes. During the investigation the additional details of the murder were not considered, namely the brutal circumstances of the killing and sexual mutilation of Avaz’ corpse. LGBTI activists were also barred from the court. Gulaliyev was sentenced without any consideration of a biased motive, which would have carried with it double the length of sentence.

ILGA-Europe believe that Azerbaijan failed to fulfil its human rights obligation to prompt, thorough, impartial, and independent investigation to hold responsible person to account for “honour killing” and hate crime as it did not take aggravating circumstances into account when determining sentence.

Avaz’s murder came in the wake of Instagram posts last year by Azerbaijani social media influencer, Sevinj Huseynova, who called for the physical ‘removal’ of sexual minorities and trans people from Azerbaijan in a video that was watched by thousands.

Here is a timeline in the lead-up to Avaz’ murder and the conviction of his cousin, and why it is an example of a stacked system against LGBTI people and the activist movement in Azerbaijan.

July 7, 2021

Azeri Instagram star, Sevinj Huseynova shared a video on her Instagram account in which she humiliated LGBTIs, especially trans women, and encouraged hatred and hostility towards them.

July 9, 2021

A group of trans women made an official appeal to the 17th police station and demanded that Sevinj Huseynova be brought to justice. Despite the appeal, no legal action was taken against Huseynova.

July 16, 2021

Three people were attacked due to their gender in their private house in Khirdalan settlement, Absheron region, and one of them was injured with three stab wounds.

August 13, 2021

Four LGBTI people were attacked in one of the buildings located on Heydar Aliyev Avenue in Khirdalan settlement. One of them was injured.

August 23, 2021

The burned body of Nuray, a trans woman targeted by Sevinj Huseynova, was found by locals in the Buta settlement of Garadagh district.

August 25, 2021

A group of trans women gathered in front of the Garadagh District Police Department and held a protest regarding the murder of the trans woman Nuray. Later, they gathered in front of the Ombudsman's office and put forward demands. Avaz Hafizli was one of the organisers of the protest. He was vocal in criticising the police for not taking any action against Huseynova, and about the attacks in the wake of Huseynova's Instagram video.

September 5, 2021

Avaz Hafizli attempted suicide after he was personally threatened and insulted by Sevinj Huseynova.

September 8, 2021

Avaz chained himself to the fences of the Prosecutor General's, as protest against Huseynova threatening and insulting him and his family. Despite Avaz Hafizli's official appeal to the prosecutor's office, no action was taken.

September 10, 2021

Avaz held a one-person rally in the centre of Baku to protest the transphobic and homophobic hate speech by Huseynova. He held up a sign reading "LGBT rights, human rights" and chanted "down with homophobia." Avaz expressed dissatisfaction with the failure of state agencies to respond to Huseynova's threatening calls.

February 22, 2022

Avaz was murdered by his cousin, 24-year-old Amrulla Gulaliyev. The murder was conducted in a gruesome fashion, followed by mutilations of Avaz' body after his death. Gulaliyev was subsequently arrested, and was charged only with the Article 120.1 of Criminal Code – Deliberate murder.

June 20, 2022

The preliminary hearing was held by the judge of Baku Court of Grave Crimes, Ali Mammadov.

July 18, 2022

Having been postponed on July 4, the second hearing was held. Hearings are open to the public, however civil society representatives were not allowed to attend.

Avaz' brother represented him in the court and said he did not have any complaints against the perpetrator, his cousin. The court then asked Avaz' mother to represent him. She said she would have to think about it.

There were some contradictions in perpetrator's statements to police and his testimony in court. He originally told investigators that he had planned the murder three months before the event itself, however during the hearing he denied this. He said that had he and Avaz had been living in the same house for many years, and that only in 2022 did he decide to murder Avaz because of the moral ethics of society.

After repeated requests from LGBTI activists to attend the hearings, only three were allowed with the argument that 'there are limited places'. However when the activists entered the court room there was sufficient space to have accommodated all the requests of activists to attend.

July 29, 2022

The three activists managed to attend the concluding hearing, at which Amrulla Gulaliyev was sentenced to nine years and six months in prison.

It is unclear to civil society whether the court's decision will be appealed, as there is no contact with Avaz' mother, who is his legal representative in this case.

Why this case is important for the Azeri movement and every LGBTI person in Azerbaijan

Over decades of monitoring by local activists, incidents of hate speech and hate crime in Azerbaijan have been numerous and severe. The state has taken no action to tackle homophobia at societal level, while existing legal mechanisms have not been implemented to protect LGBTI people from hate speech or attacks.

But this case shows how both the state and the family as institutions fail LGBTI people. While activists have gained sufficient legal knowledge and formed partnerships to offer legal support, they cannot intervene in cases where the family are both the perpetrators and the legal representatives of the victim at the same time.

The Azeri state's efforts to silence the truth about this anti-LGBTI honour killing by not allowing the activists to access court hearings also adds to the impunity for such grave acts against this LGBTI people, who remain the most unprotected and vulnerable group in the face of homophobia in Azerbaijan.