

Four questions for Fatima Karimova

Article published in the Deutsche Welle dossier

geschrieben von Politik und Kultur

To what extent has your journalistic work changed since you have been living in exile in Germany - in terms of the topics you cover, your research and your access to sources?

My fellow Mikroskop Media co-founder, Javid Abdullayev, and I have been living in exile for nearly ten years. When we started Mikroskop Media back in 2018 from an asylum center in Latvia—before eventually moving to Germany—we knew our work would look very different from what we did in Azerbaijan. Being physically away from the country creates an immediate gap. You can't observe people's daily struggles firsthand, attend protests, or cover events on the ground before arrests happen. To adapt, we moved almost everything online. We monitor state, pro-government, and independent outlets, follow public discussions on social media, and stay in constant touch with our local sources. Our work mostly involves fact-checking official news, writing explainer pieces, and conducting open-source research. During elections, for instance, we monitor live streams from cameras inside polling stations to catch violations as they happen. In one election, our reporting directly led to an official admission of fraud and the annulment of results at that specific station.

What opportunities does working from Germany offer you, and where do you continue to encounter limitations or dependencies?

Operating from Germany offers unprecedented access to information through official document requests and institutional transparency. A rare privilege is the ability to accredit for high-level events—such as Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's visits to Berlin—allowing us to question him directly, an opportunity virtually nonexistent for independent press inside Azerbaijan. However, exile does not yield complete safety. Physical immunity from arrest inside Azerbaijan has led to digital retaliation: our website has been hacked, and our social media channels face incessant cyber harassment. A grave concern is that host authorities often underrate the threat of transnational repression. Many exiled journalists endure this shadow of fear. For example, unidentified individuals posing as police officers once targeted our previous apartment, inspecting our door and mailbox. Despite filing an official police report, the investigation yielded no results after a year, leaving those responsible unidentified. The primary constraint remains this structural underestimation of foreign security threats operating in Germany.

In your view, what is needed to enable journalists in exile to continue their work independently and professionally in the long term?

Exile resets a journalist's life instantaneously. Unlike planned career moves, our displacement is sudden, unstructured, and emotionally traumatic—often reduced to what can fit into a single suitcase overnight. Upon arrival, navigating complex bureaucratic systems like Germany's forces journalists into basic survival mode: securing housing, covering daily living expenses, and building a network from scratch. Sustaining independent journalism amid these existential hurdles is exceptionally challenging. Furthermore, integrating into local newsrooms presents formidable barriers, including language limitations, non-transferable regional experience, or lack of local newsroom interest in our home region. To ensure long-term independence, exiled journalists require institutional support: sustainable funding models, direct assistance with housing and administrative integration, and proactive legal protection against transnational threats from host countries.

What role do international media organisations such as Deutsche Welle play for journalists in exile?

As I mentioned, finding work in local newsrooms is difficult for exiled journalists. However, international media outlets like Deutsche Welle are in a great position to make use of our regional knowledge, language skills, and journalistic background. Working more closely with exiled reporters would be a win-win for both sides. To bridge this gap, together with several exiled colleagues, we

recently established an organization called Exile Team to help displaced journalists integrate into the German media environment, connect with local newsrooms, and continue their work after leaving their home countries. Institutions like DW and other German media outlets could offer huge support by partnering with initiatives like ours. By building these practical connections, international media can help ensure that independent journalism covering restricted societies stays alive for the long run.

Fatima Karimova is Editor-in-chief and co-founder of Mikroskop Media

This text was translated into German and published in the 'Deutsche Welle' special feature, which appeared on 1 November 2026 as a supplement to the newspaper Politik & Kultur. The German translation was carried out by Sophia Blochowicz, editorial assistant at Politik & Kultur.