

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum condemns the continuing crackdown on independent media and human rights advocates in Azerbaijan

The government of Azerbaijan, which is due to take over the chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Council of Ministers in May 2014, must free falsely imprisoned journalists such as Rashad Ramazanov and Sardar Alibeyli. Ramazanov, a blogger critical of the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, was recently jailed for nine years on dubious charges of possession of drugs. Alibeyli, editor of the *PS Nota* publication, was given a four-year prison sentence on charges of hooliganism.

The authorities must also drop their campaign against *Azadlig* (Freedom) newspaper, a rare independent media voice in Azerbaijan. Its editor-in-chief, Ganimat Zahid, and satirist, Mirza Sakit, have been arrested, and other staff have been physically intimidated and even forced to leave the country. At the same time, the publication is suffering cyber-attacks and economic pressure, which threatens its existence.

Anar Mammadli, the Chairman of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center (EMDS), Bashir Suleymanli, the EMDS Executive Director, and Elnur Mammadli, the head of the International Cooperation of Volunteers public union (ICV), have been under **criminal** investigation since the end of October for receiving foreign grants to fund observation of the presidential election on 9 October 2013. This investigation must also be dropped. Mammadli, a member of the outgoing Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, has also been prevented by government authorities in Azerbaijan from attending the Steering Committee meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania, on 29 November 2013.

The Steering Committee also endorses the European Parliament's call for the release of Ilgar Mammadov, a civil society leader and the Director of the Baku School of Political Studies of the Council of Europe. Mammadov has been detained unlawfully on trumped up charges since February 2013 because he was nominated to stand as a candidate in the Azeri presidential election.

In the OSCE ODIHR report on the presidential elections issues on 10 October 2013, Tana de Zulueta, the head of the long-term election observation mission, stated: "The limitations placed on the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association, and expression, the lack of a level playing field, the allegations of intimidation all came in the lead up to an election day that our observers found to be seriously flawed."¹

This conclusion was shared by the monitoring of the elections by the members of the National Platform of the Civil Society Forum.

The government of Azerbaijan must live up to the commitments it made when it joined the Council of Europe, including respect for human rights, democratic values, and the rule of law.

If Azerbaijan continues to treat its dissenting voices with a blatant disregard for basic rights, then, in the view of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, the Council of Europe should postpone Azerbaijan's chairmanship until such time as it conforms with the rules of the organisation.

¹ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR). <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/106908>