

Wednesday, 19 June 2013

**To: Mr Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council
Mr José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission**

Dear President Van Rompuy,
Dear President Barroso,

The undersigned organizations call on you to prominently raise human rights issues when you meet with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Brussels later this week. We fully support the letter sent to you by our Azerbaijani colleagues on June 14, 2013 highlighting a number of worrying trends in Azerbaijan. In view of the deteriorating human rights situation in Azerbaijan, we hope you will use this opportunity to reaffirm that energy and trade cannot take precedence over democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

The approach of presidential elections in Azerbaijan scheduled for October 2013 has triggered an increase in the level of restriction and abuse of fundamental freedoms. A new legislative framework for the operation of NGOs adopted in February 2013 requires a burdensome formal registration of all grants exceeding 200 euros. This law is yet another obstacle to the already difficult operation of NGOs. Moreover, in May 2013 the criminalization of libel was extended to include online activities. That same month the length of the maximum prison sentences for administrative offences that can be imposed for involvement in peaceful public protests was increased from 15 days to two months.

The European institutions have already begun to voice their profound concern about the lack of respect for human rights in Azerbaijan. The European Parliament in a resolution of June 13, 2013 dealing with the arrest of Ilgar Mammadov, the presidential candidate of the opposition, condemned the Azerbaijani authorities for countless deficiencies in human rights protection and called for immediate action.

Earlier this year the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution on the need for Azerbaijan to honor international obligations and commitments. The resolution noted that since Azerbaijan joined the Council of Europe not a single parliamentary or presidential election has fully met democratic standards. Moreover, European MPs criticized the lack of an independent judiciary, abuses of freedom of expression and the repressive environment towards human rights defenders.

We believe that the Commission and EEAS officials are to follow-up on the European Parliament's resolution and fully comply with the request therein, including the calls addressed by the Parliament to the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan. We hope you will stress that respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law are prerequisites for an Association Agreement. Most immediately, we call on you to urge President Aliyev to: release all political prisoners, to decriminalize libel, and to repeal all restrictive laws with respect to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

Moreover, we call on the Commission and EEAS to follow-up the resolution of the European Parliament and to:

- request granting the Azerbaijan Human Rights House unconditional authorization to

reopen, registering the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre and the Human Rights Club as well as the Free Thought University without further delays or administrative burdens;

- report to the EP on the way the EEAS will apply the 'more for more' principle, with a specific focus on inclusive, free and fair elections, the independence of the judiciary, democratic reforms and fundamental rights and freedoms, and lay down the consequences of lagging behind in relation to reforms;
- report to the EP on the way the EU Delegation in Baku will pay close attention to human rights concerns during the forthcoming election cycle, showing support for human rights defenders by attending events organised by civil society and speaking out on their behalf, closely monitoring court trials and supporting media freedom, inter alia by demanding the viable transmission of independent radio and television channels during the election campaign.

Sincerely,

- Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Human Rights Club, Azerbaijan
- Belarusian Human Rights House in exile in Vilnius, Lithuania
- Center for Civil Liberties, Ukraine
- People in Need, Czech Republic
- International Partnership for Human Rights, Belgium
- Belarusian Helsinki Committee
- Kharkiv Regional Foundation „Public Alternative“, Ukraine
- International Bureau for Human Rights, Kazakhstan
- Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union
- Public Verdict Foundation, Russia
- Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, Russia
- Georgian Young Lawyers Association
- Human Rights Center, Azerbaijan
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee
- Netherlands Helsinki Committee
- Helsinki Committee of Armenia
- Legal Transformation Center, Belarus
- Albanian Helsinki Committee
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